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From narratives to history: new perspectives on mass emigration of Jews from Islamic countries in the early 1950s

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ABSTRACT

Contested narratives of the mass Jewish immigration from Arab countries to the young state of Israel emphasize Israel's central role in this episode, positively and negatively. However, new studies reveal that Israel was only one actor in the Jewish exodus, with other key roles filled by Arab states, the British Empire in the Middle East, the French Empire in North Africa, the United States, and international Jewish organizations, particularly the Jewish-American Joint Distribution Committee. This complexity is particularly evident in the case of three countries from which nearly the entire Jewish population emigrated to Israel during its early statehood: Yemen, Iraq, and Libya. This article proposes a comprehensive synthesis of research perspectives on the phenomenon of Jewish migration, with a focus on the cases of Libya, Yemen, and Iraq. I address what is common and what is unique to the migrations of these three communities, examine the entities involved in organizing their departure and those involved in their transit, and, drawing on this unique story, I propose a new historiographic interpretation of the phenomenon as a whole.

KEYWORDS

Jewish mass emigration;
Britain and Jewish
emigration; Jews of Yemen;
Jews of Libya; Jews of Iraq

Introduction

Two mass population movements changed the Middle East following the establishment of the State of Israel. One was the expulsion and flight of more than 700,000 Palestinians and the emergence of the Palestinian refugee problem, and the other was the mass emigration of about one million Jews from ancient communities that had existed in the Middle East and North Africa for two thousand years or more, most of whom immigrated to Israel. The first great wave of Jewish emigration from Islamic countries took place in 1949–1951 and continued on a smaller scale throughout the 1950s. Another major wave of emigration took place during the first half of the 1960s, as most of the remaining Jews in these countries gradually emigrated. Today most of these countries (Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Algeria) no longer have a Jewish population, and only two small communities, numbering about 30,000 Jews, remain in Iran and Turkey, with a few thousand more in Morocco and Tunisia.

While the displacement of Palestinians became the subject of numerous studies from the very outset,¹ there has been almost no scholarly inquiry regarding the displacement of

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Middle Eastern and North African Jews. In its place are narratives formulated by various involved entities. Only in recent decades did we begin to see published studies based on archival material that place the phenomenon of emigration within the broader historical context of Jewish communities in Islamic countries during the modern era.² These include my earlier studies on emigration from Iraq and Yemen, while emigration from Libya will be addressed in the present study. Drawing on my studies and other new studies, this article proposes a comprehensive synthesis of research perspectives on the phenomenon of Jewish migration in the early 1950s, focusing on the cases of Libya, Yemen, and Iraq.

While the Arab-Jewish conflict and its repercussions on the Palestinian refugee problem will not be discussed as standalone issues in the present article, they are an inseparable part of the process described below.

For years the State of Israel has portrayed the driving forces behind Jewish immigration from Islamic countries as a combination of factors: the hardship of exile – that is, persecution and a hatred of Israel that drove the Jews to leave – and religious ideological motives, such as messianism and redemption, that drew Jews to the Land of Israel and helped realize the prophecy foretelling the People of Israel's return to its land. This intertwined explanation was one element of a Zionist meta-narrative based on the paradigm of “a return from exile to sovereignty.”³ The narrative is salient in school curricula and the public discourse.⁴

In Arab countries little attention has been paid to the “disappearance” of Jews,⁵ and to the extent that it has been mentioned, the phenomenon is ascribed to Zionism and the State of Israel. In contrast to the Zionist narrative, however, these accounts refer not to redemption but to the destruction of a Jewish-Arab symbiosis, a destruction instigated by Zionism, which they describe as a divisive force that generated the Arab-Jewish conflict and, through its various activities in the Middle East, undermined the position of Jews in Arab countries. This is strikingly evident in Iraq, where it was charged that covert agents of Israel had carried out acts of terror against the Jewish community so as to expedite its immigration. Other sources spoke of false Zionist propaganda aimed at promoting immigration.⁶

Both of these are “top-down” narratives, promulgated by the governments of the opposing sides. The voice of the immigrants themselves is not featured in these narratives. However, in the 1970s new voices emerged that did not align with either of these narratives – the voices of Jews from Arab countries, now residing in Israel and the Diaspora. They had first-hand experience of the trials and tribulations of emigration, which had forced them to leave their homes abruptly, often to flee. They knew the hardship of trying to integrate into new communities, leaving behind nostalgic memories as well as various properties and rights. These Jews offered a narrative of suffering and expulsion that attributed the emigration from Islamic countries to hatred of Jews, anti-Semitism reminiscent of Nazi Germany, and persecution. At the center of this new narrative was the concept of *dhimmi* – a “protected person” – signifying the legal and social status of Jews and Christians in Islamic countries. The concept was now portrayed as a key characteristic of Jewish life, embodying inferior status, exclusion, degradation, persecution, expulsion, and pogroms throughout the history of Jews in Islamic countries.⁷ The new narrative attacked the Arab counter-narrative of a continuous Jewish-Muslim symbiosis,

describing instead a miserable life in the shadow of Islam and linking the Jewish exodus from Arab countries with expulsion and ethnic cleansing. Concepts of Zionism, redemption, and messianic longing are not featured in this narrative. Rather, the Jews were portrayed as outcasts who became refugees and were then forgotten and excluded from history.⁸

The past decade has seen a shift in the Israeli approach: without discarding the narrative of redemption, it has in tandem – and ignoring the inherent contradiction – adopted the narrative of suffering and expulsion.⁹ In 2012 the Foreign Ministry introduced the slogan “I am a Jewish refugee” and in 2014 it established November 30 as a day to commemorate the expulsion and departure of Jews from Arab countries and Iran. This decision has engendered cooperative efforts between Israel and Western-based Jewish immigrant organizations that demand recognition of Jewish suffering, displacement, and the material and cultural world that Jews in Arab countries lost. They pose the narrative of suffering and expulsion as a counter-narrative to Palestinian claims of expulsion, displacement, and loss of property.

As early as the 1990s, the narrative of suffering and displacement began drawing fierce criticism from academics in Israel and the West, many of whom were second-generation Jewish immigrants from Islamic countries. Some of them, adopting an anti-Zionist narrative based largely on the Arab-Palestinian narrative, accused Zionism of crimes not only against Palestinians but also against Jews from Islamic countries, and of destroying ancient communities through fraudulence and provocation.¹⁰ Other critical intellectuals presented a different perspective: they critiqued the narrative of suffering and expulsion, regarding it as a subordination of the history of Jews from Islamic countries to the Zionist narrative as it conceives the history of European Jews. Like Jewish-American historian Salo (Shalom) Baron’s critique of European Jewry’s “lachrymose” narrative, the narrative of suffering in Islamic countries, too, was dubbed “lachrymose.” The aim of this critique is to promote comprehensive, in-depth historical research on Jewish society as part of the totality of political, economic, social, and cultural history, with attention to the issue’s complexity and nuances.¹¹

Despite academic criticism, all the narratives and perspectives described above persist, side by side, within an arena of violent ongoing conflict between two national movements. They form an inseparable part of a broader network of clashing national narratives and, in combination, they attest to the intensity of the conflict. They also make evident that the conflict relates not only to the limited territory of a disputed land but also to a vast area spanning North Africa and the entire Middle East.¹²

Against the background of these conflicting and confusing narratives, I will try to sketch the picture that emerges from historical research on Jewish emigration from Arab countries to Israel and elsewhere, and I will examine the extent – if any – to which it accords with the picture painted by any of the narratives. Indeed, I posit that historical reality was far more complex and heterogeneous than portrayed by the various narratives, and efforts to encapsulate this rich centuries-long history and these complex emigration processes in one or another single narrative dishonors the Jews of Arab countries and those involved in bringing them to Israel. Moreover, the characteristics of Jewish migration from Islamic countries indicate that the historical status of Jews in these countries had no bearing on their departure. The phenomenon encompassed all countries in the Middle East and North Africa, both those with a tradition of tolerance

toward Jews and those that left an imprint of persecution and oppression in collective Jewish memory.

At the outset, I will focus on the first wave of mass emigration, using it to demonstrate that, in contrast to the Zionist as well as the anti-Zionist narrative, the factor that most often drove the exodus of Jews from their countries of origin was not any Israeli initiative, but rather the policies of local authorities and pressure from domestic sources. These were supplemented by developments long underway in Arab countries, especially the rise of national movements and the anti-colonial struggle, as well as efforts by international actors: first and foremost the British, who played an important part in all the stages of the immigration of the Jewish population to Israel during its first years of statehood, but also the United States and, in particular, American Jewish organizations, which had a decisive role in funding the immigration enterprise. I will demonstrate that while the State of Israel openly declared that the immigration of Jews from Arab countries was an essential component of its immigration policy and a cornerstone of its security policy, in 1949–1950 it gave priority to the immigration of Jewish refugees from Europe and aimed to spread the immigration processes from Arab countries over a longer period of time. As a result, Israel did not initiate the events that led to the mass departure from those countries. Rather, Israel was primarily responding to those events, and in some cases even unwillingly.

Next, I will show how this emigration served the interests of all the entities involved: Arab states, which were interested in preventing the instability that could erupt as long as there was a Jewish minority in their territory; the British and the Americans, who were interested in stability in the countries within their spheres of influence in the early stages of the Cold War; the State of Israel, which aspired to become demographically stronger; and Jews of Arab countries who were interested in an option that seemed to them, at the time, to offer the possibility of a better and safer future for them and their children.

An overview of Jewish emigration from Islamic countries

In May 1948, on the eve of Israel's founding, about one million Jews were living in Islamic countries across the Middle East and North Africa. The years 1948–1951 saw the first wave of immigration from these countries, during which 340,000 Jews arrived in Israel, accounting for approximately half of the 700,000 immigrants that Israel absorbed in that period. The immigrants from Islamic countries comprised two distinct groups: The first, accounting for about two-thirds of the immigrants (approximately 210,000), was classified as part of the *hisul galuyot* (elimination of diasporas) endeavor, in the context of which three communities were almost wholly relocated to Israel – the Jews of Yemen, Libya, and Iraq.¹³ These immigrants qualified for what Israel identified as *aliyat hatzalah* (rescue immigration), which exempted them from quotas and selection based on age and health. This was a category of immigrants that Israel had to receive *en masse* and without restrictions because, as I explain below, the issue was out of its control, and refusing to receive them could have cost them dearly and – from Israel's perspective – resulted in squandering an opportunity that might not reoccur.

The second group comprised approximately 130,000 Jews from various communities in the Middle East and North Africa, including Turkey (34,000), Iran (25,000), Syria and Lebanon (2,500), Egypt (17,000), and Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia (45,000).¹⁴ Some of

these immigrants were Zionist idealists, members of Zionist movements and their families.¹⁵ But beyond and in addition to ideology, there were many other reasons for this wave of immigration: in belligerent Arab countries – Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon – emigration reflected fears of negative political repercussions; in North Africa and Iran it stemmed from economic factors; and in Turkey, it was driven by a nationalist policy and economic persecution that had a severe impact on the Jewish public.¹⁶

All the immigrants to Israel followed an orderly process arranged by Israeli emissaries and funded by US Jewry through the Jewish Agency and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). The process began with their departure from home, followed by a stay in transit camps, and then a journey by boat or airplane that concluded at the Haifa Port or Lod Airport, respectively. Few emigrated to Western countries, as these countries tended not to welcome immigrants in the years following World War II.

This wave of immigration reduced the Jewish population in Islamic countries by one-third and was particularly evident in Middle Eastern countries, where fewer than 200,000 Jews remained. After 1951 the remaining Jews were concentrated primarily in Iran (70,000) and Turkey (50,000), both non-Arab countries, and in Egypt (45,000). The largest concentration of Jews was in French North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia), where more than half a million Jews resided.¹⁷ There was very little emigration from these countries, with only 45,000 immigrants arriving during Israel's first years. Notably, many thousands sought to emigrate, but in the early 1950s the State of Israel and the Jewish Agency determined that Jewish immigration from Iran, Turkey, and North Africa was not a matter of urgency, and as cases of *aliyat hatzalah* increased, the quotas for Jews from these countries decreased. Moreover, the press often published articles denigrating the character of North African Jews, thus legitimizing this policy.¹⁸ In November 1951, Israel approved selection guidelines that not only restricted immigration on the basis of the state's economic absorptive capacity but also set limits based on age and health and conditioned entry on a commitment by the immigrants to join an agricultural settlement.¹⁹ These restrictions, alongside awareness of the harsh conditions in Israel, greatly reduced the number of Jews seeking to immigrate to Israel. The hardest hit were two Jewish communities interested in immigration: Iran and Morocco.

During 1954–1956, concurrent with French decolonization, emigration from North Africa increased, but after 1956, when Tunisia and Morocco gained independence, it decreased and shifted to illegal channels. Mass immigration resumed only in the 1960s when the leaderships of Israel and Morocco coordinated a massive exodus of Jews, who had two primary destinations: a majority immigrated to Israel, and the rest made their way to France. A few reached other destinations in the West. In 1962, after Algeria gained independence, the phenomenon of an entire community being evacuated recurred, only this time the Jews did not reach Israel. As part of the evacuation of approximately one million residents with French citizenship, nearly all the 140,000 Jews of Algeria relocated to France.²⁰

A particular pattern of Jewish expulsion or mass flight as a consequence of persecution emerged after additional rounds of warfare between Israel and its neighbors. In the aftermath of the Sinai War (1956), more than 30,000 Jews in Egypt were forced to emigrate.²¹ In the 1960s Iraq had a small, flourishing Jewish community of 3,000, but after the 1967 War, this community fell victim to persecution and violence including the hangings of 11 Jews, which drove its members to flee by way of Iran and from there to

various destinations – Israel, Britain (primarily London), and North America.²² The few thousand Jews left in Libya – a prosperous elite that stayed behind after the mass emigration of the early 1950s – were also forced to leave, and most opted to immigrate to Italy.²³ Most of the Jews in Iran, who had experienced prosperity and success in the 1960s and 1970s, left the country after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, with a majority choosing the United States over Israel.²⁴ Elsewhere – in Syria – members of the small Jewish community, which numbered fewer than 5,000, were barred from leaving and for many years were held hostage. Only in the 1990s were they granted exit permits. Some immigrated to Israel and a majority to the United States. The remaining Jews of Yemen formed another small residual community, most of whom immigrated to Israel in the 1990s and a few to the United States.²⁵

In contrast to the mass migration of the early 1950s, when Israel was the destination for nearly all emigrants, during the subsequent gradual waves, which lasted several years, a significant portion of Jews immigrated to countries in Western Europe, North America, and South America, joining long-standing communities founded by their fellow expatriates, which now became magnet communities. These immigrants were characterized by modern human capital and financial capital – Western education, social networks, personal initiative, personal connections, and money that they had managed to smuggle to the West before or while emigrating. One may surmise, therefore, that the Westernized Jewish population was more mobile and had the option of immigrating to Western destinations, whereas the less Westernized and more traditional population had fewer options, the primary one being Israel. Some of these Jews kept their citizenship and were able to return to their countries of origin (for example, the Jews of Iran under the Shah or the Jews of Morocco and Tunisia), but the few who did so usually emigrated again later. Naturally, there were those who did not follow any of the tracks outlined above, whether for personal, religious, or ideological reasons, or because of other circumstances, but these were few. The above patterns make evident that a Zionist background and Zionist activism were not decisive factors in choosing an immigration destination. Ben-Gurion commented on this phenomenon as the wave of mass immigration came to a close: “When the gates were opened wide – the two parted: immigration and Zionism. The immigrants were not Zionists and the Zionists were not immigrants. From ancient lands came vast immigration, although with almost no mark of the Zionist movement.”²⁶

Ultimately the Islamic countries were almost completely emptied of their Jewish population, which had lived there since ancient times. Nearly all of the one million Jews who inhabited these lands in 1948 left within a very brief span of time. About two-thirds immigrated to Israel and the rest to various countries in Western Europe, especially France, as well as North America, Argentina, and Brazil. Today approximately 30,000 Jews remain in Islamic countries, primarily, as noted, Iran and Turkey – both non-Arab countries.

The above description sketches a fairly general picture of Jewish departure from Islamic countries. Next, I offer a more detailed and in-depth examination of three communities that immigrated to Israel almost *en masse* during 1949–1951 – the Jewish communities of Libya, Yemen, and Iraq – and I explore the circumstances of their departure, including the roles various political entities played in this process. Migration on such a large scale and in such a short period of time deviates from the accepted definitions of migrations which are spread over a longer period of time, related

to different social networks and destinations. These migrations are usually undertaken by young immigrants, who lay down an infrastructure for the absorption of their family members, and who sometimes return to their homeland. The three mass migrations, as I will demonstrate later, are more suitable for a consensual population transfer model, conducted in cooperation between governments, international organizations, and the Jewish immigrants themselves.

Three cases of consensual population transfer

At first glance one is hard-pressed to find common characteristics among the Jewish communities that once resided in Libya, Yemen, and Iraq. Geographically, they were located in distant parts of the Arab world – Iraq to the east, Yemen in the southern tip of the Arab Peninsula, and Libya in North Africa. Two of these were small communities – Yemen had 50,000 Jews and Libya had 35,000 – while Iraq, the largest among them, had a Jewish community that numbered 135,000. The legal and social status of Jews differed radically across these three countries: in Yemen, under the rule of Imam al-Mutawakkil Yahya Hamid al-Din, Jews had an inferior, demeaning status, as *dhimmi*, in accordance with the rules of Sharia law that had been in force since Yemen's conquest by Islamic forces in the seventh century,²⁷ whereas under monarchical Iraq's parliamentary government, Jews enjoyed the status of equal citizens, as stipulated by the British Mandate upon its inception in Iraq in 1922 and codified in the Iraqi constitution of 1924. The Jews retained their equal status after Iraq achieved independence in 1932.²⁸ In Libya the Jews' legal status derived from the colonial influence in the region following Libya's occupation by Italy in 1912. The Jewish economic and social elite had European citizenship (French, British, or Italian), and the remaining Jews – the vast majority – were Libyan nationals.²⁹ This status remained unchanged after Libya's occupation by British forces in 1943.

The three communities also differed significantly in the social and economic spheres. Iraq's Jewish community was mostly urban, comprising a large middle class and a wealthy elite. Members of the community were integrated into public and governmental administration and held important positions in local and international trade. Notwithstanding the "Farhud" – rioting against the community in June 1941, a trauma that left a deep scar on the community – it was able to recover economically and even achieve a period of prosperity.³⁰ In contrast, most of the Jews in Yemen, a country not exposed to modernity, faced economic hardship, and in the 1940s the population as a whole experienced famine and epidemics following several years of continuous drought.³¹ In Libya, too, the Jews faced hardship as a result of racial laws enacted by Fascist Italy and the horrors of war in the region, which was alternatingly and repeatedly subjected to Italian-German occupation and British occupation. Hundreds lost their lives in labor camps established by the Italians and dozens were sent to extermination camps in Europe. During a brutal pogrom in November 1945, about 130 Jews were slaughtered, hundreds were injured, a great deal of property was looted, and Jewish businesses were vandalized and set on fire.³²

Jewish involvement with local culture also varied. In Iraq, there emerged an intellectual elite that engaged with the local Arab culture and viewed Iraq as its homeland.³³ Libya's Jews were divided between the European – especially Italian – cultural arena and the Jewish-Arab arena. In Yemen, Jews continuously engaged in extensive cultural

activity, but solely within the Jewish world, and local political activity was minimal and infrequent. Furthermore, Yemen and Libya were not actively involved in the Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine.

Yet despite these general differences, there was a great deal of similarity in the patterns of immigration from these three communities. All three were evacuated *en masse* – more than 95% of the Jews in Iraq and Yemen and 85% of Libya's Jews left their countries and came to Israel. All three communities also immigrated within a brief span of time – from 18 months (Yemen and Iraq) to three years (Libya).

In all three of these cases, the Jews departed for one destination, the State of Israel, with only a few emigrating to other countries. This unique phenomenon, which is not characteristic of migration processes, was attributable to several factors. First, the Western countries to which Jews wanted to immigrate were reluctant to accept additional refugees, beyond those they had absorbed after World War II. Second, these mass exoduses were made possible through informal agreements between the countries of origin and Israel, and because they did not involve passports, they did not permit immigration to other countries. In addition, the transportation arrangements excluded any option of immigrating elsewhere: emigration from Libya was conducted mainly via Israeli ships that sailed from the port of Tripoli directly to Haifa, while the immigrants from Yemen and Iraq were airlifted from Aden, Baghdad, and Basra to the airport in Lod, in an operation carried out by Alaska Airlines, an American company contracted by Israel's El Al airlines.³⁴

The Jewish-Arab conflict over Palestine, and the establishment of the State of Israel in particular, had a dramatic impact on these three communities. On December 2, 1947, a few days after the passage of the UN resolution calling for the partition of Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state, Muslim residents of Aden attacked the city's small Jewish community, killing more than 80 Jews and wounding hundreds, burning Jewish public institutions and businesses, and destroying the community's economic infrastructure.³⁵ In Yemen itself, the Jews of Sana'a suffered the negative consequences of a war after Imam Yahya was assassinated in February 1948, and even more devastating was the fact that dozens of Jewish leaders were imprisoned on charges of murdering two Muslim girls. They were released several months later and after paying heavy fees.³⁶ Likewise in Libya, violence broke out against the Jews of Tripoli in June 1948, resulting in 14 deaths and dozens of injuries.³⁷ In the years 1948–1949, during Israel's war of independence and its aftermath, Iraq's Jews, too, were the victims of anti-Zionist policies that often did not differentiate between Jews and Zionists. Hundreds of people were imprisoned, money was extorted from the community's wealthy members, and Shafiq Ades – one of the community's financial tycoons and a close associate of Iraqi leaders – was hanged for treason and aiding the Zionists.³⁸ These events brought to mind the riots that had taken place in Baghdad seven years earlier and resulted in the slaughter of 179 Jews.³⁹ It should be noted that persecution of Jews during these years was not limited to these three countries; it occurred in Syria, Egypt, and Morocco as well.

These events reflected growing doubts about the loyalty of Jews to the countries in which they lived and whether they belonged to the local nation. However, as Iraqi-born Jewish-British historian Eli Kedourie has shown, while the rift in Jewish-Muslim relations did indeed intensify in the 1940s, its roots trace back to the late nineteenth century, with the permeation of modern ideas, the granting of equal rights to Jews, and the rise of

nationalism in the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁰ Still, the attacks on Jews in the context of the Jewish-Arab conflict highlighted the fact that as long as the conflict remained unresolved, Jews in Arab countries would be vulnerable to incitement and persecution and liable to become victims of this conflict. Conversely, the establishment of a Jewish state sparked much enthusiasm, and despite reports about economic hardship in the new state, many Jews sought to immigrate to Israel.

However, it was neither the persecution nor the enthusiasm that necessarily led to the mass emigration to Israel. Indeed, Jewish persecution occurred in most Middle Eastern and North African countries but usually did not result in the near-total immigration of their Jewish communities to Israel. Even in Egypt, a belligerent state that played a key role in the war against Israel's establishment, there was no mass exodus to Israel. It follows that all the above-mentioned characteristics, for all their importance, do not explain the special case of immigration from Libya, Yemen, and Iraq to the State of Israel. To understand this phenomenon it is necessary to examine events in each of these countries, with attention to all the participating players.

Local initiative and British involvement

The conclusion of World War II marked the beginning of the decolonization of the British Empire, with India and Pakistan gaining independence in August 1947. Shortly thereafter the British Mandate in Palestine also came to an end. Nevertheless, Britain, which remained the most important power in southern parts of the Middle East, sought to protect its interests in the region, particularly in matters related to access to oil and control of the Suez Canal and the

British military bases in the area. It now intended to base its empire on its African colonies.⁴¹

Furthermore, after the eradication of the Nazi threat, the Cold War began between the Soviet bloc and the Western bloc led by the United States. The Middle East, which until now had been a clear sphere of influence of the West, was challenged by the Soviets, not only through the local communist parties but also through the threat of launching missiles and open competition for influence and penetration through aid and arms supply. Under these circumstances, the Middle East was seen as only second in strategic importance, after Western Europe, in the Cold War against the communist bloc.

The response to the Soviet threat as a part of the British imperial policy was carried by the Labor Party that came to power in July 1945 with Ernest Bevin as foreign minister. The American historian Wm. Roger Louis describes the new policy:

Postwar circumstances required a fresh approach of attempting to deal with the Middle Eastern states as partners rather than dependents, but the goal was traditional: the preservation of Britain's status as a world power with a paramount position in the Middle East. [...] The Labour ethos held that there could be a harmony of interests. The Middle East could be "developed," and defended, to the advantage of all concerned.⁴²

This concept had consequences for the fate of the Jewish communities in the areas of British influence in the Middle East. Libya, southern Yemen, and Iraq were all three under Britain's direct or indirect control: Aden was a British colony, the sultanates between Aden and Yemen were British protectorates, and Imamate Yemen, too,

maintained relations with the British rulers of Aden.⁴³ Libya was occupied by Allied forces in 1943 and remained under British rule but was to be granted independence in 1951. In November 1948, however, under international – particularly American – pressure, Britain announced that it would soon be relinquishing its control in the region and granting independence to Libya. Although Iraq had been independent since 1932, the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 ensured Britain's strategic control of the country by means of its military bases near Baghdad and Basra and management of the production and marketing of oil in northern Iraq. Thus Iraq remained under British control until its revolution in 1958.

Although these studies on British policy after World War II do not refer to the migration processes of the Jewish communities, an examination of the Jewish exodus from each of these countries reveals that the British played an important role in each case and that without their aid the emigration of Jews to Israel could not have occurred.⁴⁴

Libya

The first country to undergo mass emigration was Libya, which was within Italy's sphere of influence and, after its occupation in 1912, became an Italian colony. In January 1943 Tripoli was occupied by the British, who established a military regime in the country. Six years later, in January 1949, in the context of negotiations over the British withdrawal and Libya's pending independence, Britain announced that the country's gates would be opened for Jews seeking to leave.⁴⁵ Apparently, the British were concerned about the steadily deteriorating relations between Jews and Muslims and preferred to let the Jews leave immediately, rather than face future rioting based on religious hostility, economic competition, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴⁶ During this period, with the British Mandate in Palestine having ended and Israel having achieved statehood, the British, who had prevented Jewish immigration during the 1940s (as part of their 1939 "White Paper" policy), did not oppose the relocation of Libya's Jews to Israel. On the contrary, this land now offered a solution to the Jewish problem in Arab countries. Israel's stated policy of opening its gates to Jews made it clear to the British that it would not refuse the Jews of Libya.

In the talks leading up to Libya's independence, the JDC, alongside other Jewish organizations, played an important part in negotiating the rights of Italian and Jewish minority groups in an independent Libya. The negotiators included Libya's British rulers and representatives of local parties expected to assume leadership upon independence. It became evident that the future leaders were unwilling to commit to equal rights for Jews, despite their status as nationals and even though the Jewish community had existed in the country for many centuries.⁴⁷ The failure of these negotiations made clear to Jewish organizations, and particularly to US Jewry, the State of Israel, and Libya's Jews themselves, that emigration was imperative.

The British announcement of January 1949 sparked enthusiasm among thousands of Jews, who approached local authorities seeking to arrange their exit to Israel. Most of these applicants were Jews who had not managed to recover from the adverse impact of the anti-Semitic policies implemented during World War II, or from the fierce attacks that took place under British rule, and who now feared anti-Jewish policies at the hands of an independent Arab government. Hundreds of them reached Italy, which had

previously served as a stop on the illegal immigration route into Israel during its war of independence.⁴⁸ The emigrants from Libya joined displaced Jews from Europe – Holocaust survivors – in Jewish Agency transit camps, and from there they were transported to Israel. When the vast scale of immigrants expected to arrive from Libya became apparent, Israel dispatched delegates to Tripoli to make arrangements in accordance with quotas set by the Jewish Agency and the Israeli Health Ministry. The JDC played an important role in this process. It had already begun operating in Libya in 1945, in an effort to rehabilitate the Jewish community following the hardships suffered during World War II and as a result of rioting. The JDC began providing economic, educational, and medical assistance to the Jewish community, while also increasing cooperative efforts with the Zionist movement. In light of the political changes in Libya and the throngs of Jews seeking to leave the country, the JDC joined the operation to bring Libya's Jews to Israel, assuming the responsibility for funding as well as medical screening and treatment for the ill. This was particularly important, as Israel barred entry to the contagiously ill, demanding that they be treated before entering the country, and objected to receiving anyone with a severe chronic illness. Medical screening and healthcare took place in Libya, in cooperation with the Jewish healthcare organization OZE.⁴⁹ All these activities were conducted with the knowledge and assistance of the British: they permitted the Jewish Agency to manage the transport operation from Tripoli, allowed direct passage of ships from the port of Tripoli to Haifa, and even assisted Libyan Jews in transferring capital and property.⁵⁰

During the years 1949–1952, thirty thousand Jews arrived in Israel from Libya. But while Libyan Jews and Jewish Agency representatives may have presumed that the exodus would conclude within a few months, it eventually turned out to be a three-year process that concluded only after Libya achieved independence. It was Israel that determined the pace of immigration, in accordance with assessments of the situation in Libya and the pressures of potential Jewish immigration from other countries. When it became evident that Libya would not be achieving independence until late 1951, and therefore the evacuation of Jews was not a matter of urgency, the immigration quotas for Libyan Jews were reduced. This made it possible to give priority to other Jewish communities, including those in Yemen and Iraq, whose circumstances were seen as more ominous and their immigration therefore more urgent. Once concluded, the immigration from Libya left a small Jewish community of about 6,000 in Tripoli, primarily property owners belonging to the socio-economic elite who chose to stay.⁵¹

Yemen

Like the immigration from Libya, immigration from Yemen was originally intended to be a gradual process, but in contrast to the Libyan case it turned into a matter of urgency necessitating immediate, mass evacuation. Immigration began in December 1948, when a few thousand Jews were airlifted to Israel. In fact, they had left Yemen years earlier and spent the intervening time waiting in a refugee camp, Hashed (or “Geula” – redemption – in Hebrew) in the heart of the desert in the British colony of Aden. Following their departure the camp was destroyed, an indication of the firm British stance against any future transit of Jews from Yemen.⁵² The British, Aden's rulers, sought to put an end to a pattern that had taken place during the previous decade when many of these would-be

immigrants remained in Aden as destitute refugees. In late April 1949, Imam Ahmed granted the Jews permission to leave the country, on the condition that they sell their property, which they indeed did – at a very low cost – to their Muslim neighbors or the Imam’s representatives.⁵³ The entire process appears to have been coordinated between the Yemeni ruler and the British authorities in Aden, as evidenced by a British proposal put forward two weeks later: to open a land corridor between Yemen and Aden and allow Jews entry to a new transit camp (Hashed B), to be established within the jurisdiction of the colony and serve as a way station en route to Aden’s airport and from there to Israel. On the basis of this proposal, the British conducted negotiations with Israel and the JDC regarding arrangements for the transport of Jews from Aden to Israel.⁵⁴ The British proposal sought to avoid the recurrence of a Jewish refugee problem in the city of Aden by ensuring that Jews did not pass through it. At the same time, such an exodus, like the process concurrently underway in Libya, was intended to reduce or even resolve the problem of the Jewish minority in imamate Yemen and the entire southern region of Yemen, which as noted was under direct or indirect British control.

Subsequent events also point to cooperation between the Imam and the British. Within Yemen, the operation was overseen by the Imam, while in the two (eastern and western) protectorates between Yemen and Aden it was coordinated by British advisors who effectively controlled these regions. They supervised the sites where departing Jews were concentrated, ensured the supply of food and equipment, arranged for the trucks that would transport the emigrants to the transit camp in Aden, and took measures to protect the Jews’ lives. In traveling across different regions, the Jews had to pay steep transit fees, particularly in the protectorates, and some became targets of highwaymen. Most of them arrived in Aden penniless and destitute.⁵⁵ Like Libya’s Jews, they lacked passports, and their only possible destination was Israel. Israel initially sought to regulate immigration and prevent the influx of contagiously ill newcomers, to no avail; the rapid pace of departure and massive scale of emigration were dictated by Yemen’s and Aden’s governing authorities, and Israel had to adjust its immigration policy and improvise solutions for immigrant reception.

In an exceptional move, relative to its other immigration operations, Israel entrusted the transport of Yemen’s Jews to the JDC, a philanthropic organization that was not subordinate to the Israeli government and did not always fully cooperate with it. A failure to grasp the massive and immediate scale of immigration led to poor planning of the airlift and inadequate investment in preparing the transit camp in Aden.⁵⁶ Moreover, in contrast to Libya, Imamate Yemen did not grant the operation’s organizers a foothold in the country, and the Jews therefore had to make their own transport arrangements; they were unable to coordinate with representatives of Israel and the JDC in Aden, received no assistance in the form of information or funding, and were entirely dependent on the Imam’s agents and the British. Thus the responsibility for organizing their journey and determining their fate fell exclusively to each of the individual men and women who embarked on the journey. Such a pattern also characterized the immigration from Yemen two decades earlier, but after Israel’s establishment, this was an exceptional situation, unparalleled by any immigration operations in Europe or other Arab countries during those years.

The operation took a heavy toll and claimed many lives during the difficult trek through Yemen, particularly after most of the emigrants contracted malaria while

moving through southern Yemen. The transit camp could not accommodate the vast numbers of those awaiting departure over the course of several weeks, and hundreds died at the camp and were buried in a cemetery established adjacent to it. The catastrophic situation worsened in late September, after the British closed the border crossings and conditioned the continued entry of Jews to Aden on the departure to Israel of thousands of emigrants still waiting in the transit camp. The consequences were severe: about ten thousand emigrants were stranded in the arid desert region of southern Yemen over the course of five weeks without enough water, food, or medicine. Hundreds of them died on the site and many remained sick and disabled.⁵⁷

The situation compelled Israel to launch a rescue operation. It brought Yemen's Jews to the country without any medical screening, within a very brief span of time, despite knowing that many of the immigrants had contagious diseases. Yemeni immigrants only began to receive medical care after arriving in Israel, and the treatment took place within isolated, fenced immigrant camps in which the new arrivals were placed. At these camps, they were examined and given medical and rehabilitative care – all under conditions of hardship and poor sanitation that included shortages in food, equipment, and medical personnel. These circumstances had severe repercussions for the absorption of Yemeni immigrants into Israel.⁵⁸

Iraq

The mass immigration of some 120,000 Jews from Iraq, which began in May 1950 and peaked in the spring and summer of 1951, came as a great surprise. It ran counter to the expectations surrounding this wealthy, well-established community, which had enjoyed civil rights and been engaged and integrated in economic, social, and cultural activities in Iraq. To understand this phenomenon, let us examine the circumstances of Iraq's Jews in the two years preceding their emigration and during the emigration period itself.

As noted above, the political and economic persecution that Iraqi Jews experienced during 1948–1949 undermined their sense of security and cast doubt on their place in Iraq. But no less worrisome were reports that circulated in the Iraqi press in 1949 about plans for a population and property exchange between 100,000 Jewish citizens of Iraq and 100,000 Palestinian refugees. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Said initially proposed a plan along these lines in early 1949, but the British objected, not because they opposed the transfer of Jewish citizens but for fear that such an exchange would escalate into a Jewish expulsion.⁵⁹ Shortly thereafter British diplomatic missions to the Middle East launched a series of talks in which they reexamined this proposal, posing additional suggestions about mutual compensation for the loss of property. They concluded these discussions by observing that, notwithstanding concerns about complications in implementing the plan, “the elimination of certain minorities might lead to more stabilities and better relations in the Middle East.”⁶⁰ These conclusions were recorded at a time when the transport of Jews from Libya and Yemen to Israel was in full swing. The summary documents reveal that British Foreign Office officials supported a population and property exchange but were unwilling to initiate or lead it: “The essence of the scheme is prior agreement between Iraq and Israel and that until such agreement is reached we should be well advised to steer clear.”⁶¹ Perhaps they were wary of bearing the responsibility for such an operation, or of failure and criticism, and perhaps they were driven by other concerns. The British

involvement has not yet been explored in depth, nor have imperialist interests and repercussions of the Cold War been thoroughly examined.

The population exchange proposal was considered by the United Nations Economic Survey Mission, which visited the Middle East in the autumn of 1949 in an effort to resolve the refugee problem, and was unofficially presented to Israel as well.⁶² Although Israel found the proposal unappealing, given that Iraqi Jews would apparently have to abandon their property, it was compelled to consent because the talks were overshadowed by the ongoing persecution of Zionists in Iraq and because Israel was in the midst of a propaganda campaign against Iraq.⁶³ The issue was receiving frequent coverage in Iraq's nationalist right-wing press, alongside calls for the expulsion of Jews,⁶⁴ and the fact that Iraqi authorities did not censor these announcements was, possibly, even more distressing to the Jews than the announcements themselves.

In December 1949, the government of Nuri al-Said fell, and the new prime minister, Tawfiq al-Suwaidi, proposed a different solution to the Jewish problem: neither forced transfer nor deportation, but rather the regulation of Jewish departure by means of a new law – the Denaturalization Law. The law, which would only remain in effect for one year, allowed Jews to leave Iraq in a legal and regulated manner on the condition that they relinquish their Iraqi nationality and the right to return to Iraq. It did not mention Jewish property. Notwithstanding its problematic provisions, the law was not intended to prompt mass deportation. It was based on assessments that the number of emigration registrants would not exceed a few thousand unemployed young Jews, communists, and Zionists – groups that had already been departing the country illegally. Moreover, registration was voluntary. The purpose of this law was to highlight the loyalty to Iraq among a majority of Iraqi Jews, who were expected to opt to remain.⁶⁵

Contrary to expectations, however, the law actually exacerbated the Jewish problem in Iraq: thousands of Jews began to prepare for departure, which contributed to economic instability and, subsequently, anti-Jewish propaganda. This, in turn, drove additional Jews to plan for departure, sparking a pattern of “rolling emigration”⁶⁶: rising numbers of registrants drew even more people – relatives, neighbors, and friends. By September 1950, when Nuri al-Said assumed the premiership again, the number of emigration registrants had reached 70,000, although at this point only 10,000 had actually emigrated while the remaining 60,000 Jews still awaited transport to Israel. The delay in the departure of Iraq's Jews stemmed from Israeli policy, which at that time granted priority to immigration from Romania, and from the difficulties Israel faced in absorbing such large numbers of immigrants. Al-Said demanded that those awaiting departure leave immediately and threatened their expulsion, which intensified the Jews' sense of insecurity, leading to ever-growing numbers of emigration registrants. The evacuation itself took place primarily over the course of four months, from March to July 1951. In all, about 105,000 Jews traveled by airlift from Iraq to Israel, and another 15,000 reached Israel via Iran – a total of 120,000. By the time the immigration operation concluded, in late 1951, fewer than 10,000 Jews remained in Iraq.⁶⁷

Although the British had not proactively participated in Iraq's legislative initiative to permit Jewish departure – indeed, the British ambassador learned about it only a few days before its submission to parliament – they nevertheless supported it and took part in the actual exodus of Jews throughout the entire process. They provided an airport in Cyprus for a stopover on the way to Israel, permitted the American company Alaska Airlines to

provide the travel arrangements even though they would have preferred British airlines, and throughout the operation conveyed messages between Israel and Iraq to ensure that the airlift ran smoothly.⁶⁸

An analysis of these events does not indicate that an Iraqi-British plan to expel the Jews ever existed, but as far as Iraq's Jews were concerned that is effectively what happened. The financial adversities they experienced in the two years preceding the law's passage, mass layoffs from government ministries and public companies, insecurity and loss of governmental protection, the knowledge that the British, too, supported their departure from Iraq, and the fact that the law would only be in force for one year – a restriction that forced many to make a fateful decision under conditions of uncertainty – combined to make the Jews of Iraq lose any hope for a better future. Thus, the Denaturalization Law, enacted in order to regulate the status of Iraq's Jews, became a trap: it undermined their status and resulted in a mass exodus. Moreover, had they wanted to, the Iraqi authorities could have rescinded the law and prevented the mass departure of Jews, but in fact they acted to expedite the process. Throughout this period, Iraq's Jews were aware of the prevailing economic hardship in Israel, but this was the only emigration option available to them and was preferable to staying in Iraq. Perhaps they assumed that Israel promised a better future for their children, perhaps they hoped that they would be able to transfer at least some of their property, and certainly they did not imagine how steep the economic and social cost of displacement would be.⁶⁹

Those who ultimately profited the most from this affair were the Iraqi authorities. A mass exodus of Jews resolved the problem of a Jewish minority without Iraq having to absorb a reciprocal number of Palestinian refugees. The same held for matters of property: in March 1951, when the Denaturalization Law expired but the emigration process was in full swing, Iraq nationalized the emigrants' property, without transferring any of the proceeds to Palestinian refugees whose property Israel had nationalized.⁷⁰ Because of the manner in which these events unfolded, Iraq never came to be seen as responsible for the emigration of Jews.

The highly surprising nature of Iraqi Jews' mass exodus subsequently spawned a conspiracy theory in Iraq and Israel, according to which the State of Israel and its Zionist envoys in Iraq were responsible for several acts of terror that took place in Baghdad during the emigration period, killing five Jews and injuring dozens. The theory held that these events, aimed at provoking panic, were the cause of the mass emigration.⁷¹ Although there is no verified information about the identity of the perpetrators, an examination of the timing of the events indicates that they could not have been a meaningful contributing factor in the departure of Jews. The first terrorist act took place on April 8, 1950, near a Jewish café, and resulted in several injuries. It coincided with the early period of registration for departure, when there were already a few thousand Jews in Iraq interested in registering. The second event took place at the Mas'uda Shemtov Synagogue about nine months later, on January 14, 1951, and resulted in the death of five Jews. By this time, however, most of the Jews – 86,000 – had already registered to leave. About 20,000 registered subsequently, but presumably they chose to join their families rather than remain in Iraq given its rapidly disappearing Jewish population. Three additional terrorist acts took place during March–July 1951, but they could not have affected the scale of departure because they occurred after the Denaturalization Law had expired and after about 105,000 Jews had already registered

to leave. Thus, the vast scale of immigration resulted not from these events (regardless of who was behind them), but from the deteriorating political and economic status of Iraq's Jews and the apprehension they were feeling throughout this period.⁷²

Moreover, the global history of immigration lacks any precedent that would support the claim that a massive wave of emigration resulted from panic sparked by five acts of terror resulting in few casualties. During this period, Europe and Asia saw the forced transfers of millions of ethnic Germans, Hindus, and Muslims, planned and carried out by governments, costing the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. In comparison, attributing the mass emigration from Iraq to the death of five Jews does a disservice to Iraqi Jews and underestimates their capacity for judgment and decision-making. It would take far more than a few acts of terror to cause more than 120,000 people to abandon the land in which they and their ancestors had lived for many generations, leaving behind a vast amount of public and private property and economic rights, and immigrate to a poor country that was incapable of, and had no intention of, compensating them for what they left behind.

Discussion and conclusions

An analysis of these three cases involving the mass migration of Jews reveals several important aspects that do not accord with either the Zionist or the anti-Zionist narratives of those events. First, Israel and the Jews were not the only actors in these immigration operations; additional key players included the Arabs, the British, and international Jewish organizations, among others. Second, despite Israel's declarations about its policy of unlimited immigration, it prioritized the immigration of Holocaust survivors from Europe. Consequently, the impetus for the departure of these three communities came not from Israel, but rather from the local authorities: the British in Libya, the Imam in Yemen, and the government in Iraq. Furthermore, in none of these cases were the British a passive actor content to offer assistance as needed. On the contrary, they played an important part in initiating, arranging, and supervising the departure of Jewish populations, in conjunction with efforts to resolve the Palestinian refugee problem. In addition, Jewish organizations in the United States, particularly the JDC, had a critical role in funding the immigration enterprise. In the case of Yemen, the JDC also oversaw the operation. The United States, although not an active participant in this particular immigration arena, supported British policy in the context of the Cold War and the Soviet threat, and therefore adopted a lenient approach to the large-scale transfer of American-Jewish monies in support of these massive emigration efforts. Without these funds, it is doubtful that the mass immigration to Israel in its early years would have been possible.

This examination of the actors who operated behind the scenes reveals that the leaders of Arab countries had a clear interest in resolving their Jewish minority problem, which in a time of ongoing national conflict became a destabilizing factor. Israel had a clear interest in receiving all Jews who sought refuge, but the scope and timing of these immigration waves did not accord with Israel's immediate interests. Its dire economic circumstances prompted Israel to postpone somewhat the arrival of Jews from Islamic countries, yet ultimately it had to receive them at a particularly inconvenient time from its perspective.

At this point, the narratives diverge: while the Zionist narrative describes Israel as the initiator of immigration and rescuer of the Jews from Arab countries, the anti-Zionist narrative accuses Israel of using provocation, through intimidation and deception, as a means of advancing Jewish immigration. But both narratives miss the mark: First, Israel did not initiate but, instead, responded to events, sometimes even unwillingly, in terms of timing as well as its limited control over Jewish emigration. Second, both narratives paint only a partial picture when they place Israel and the Jews of Arab countries in the center while overlooking, and thus dismissing, other actors that had a role in this consensual transfer of Jewish populations, including Arab leaders and the British. Indeed, Arab rulers and the British played a prominent part in the three emigrations described here. Although they placed the management of the operations in the hands of Israel and the JDC, they supervised and at times intervened in the process. This aspect of the Jewish emigration has yet to be explored, and it remains unclear how the Arab leaders and the British perceived the process as well as their own engagement, particularly considering the negative impact on the interests of Palestinian refugees.

In the same spirit, these findings also point to the limited correlation between Zionist efforts and immigration to Israel. In Yemen, there was no Zionist activity, whereas Libya and Iraq had large, vibrant Zionist movements that operated for years. Yet all three countries saw the mass evacuation of Jews, Zionists and non-Zionists alike, to Israel. In contrast, there was no mass immigration to Israel from countries where emigrants had a choice of destinations, such as Tunisia and, later, Algeria and Iran, even though Zionist activities did take place there. Nor was it necessarily Zionists who emigrated from these countries to Israel.⁷³

The findings also reveal the complexity of Israel's immigration policy. Israel, which was interested in Jewish immigration from Arab countries for ideological and demographic reasons, declared an open-door policy despite reservations within governmental institutions stemming from economic, social, and cultural difficulties. At the same time, Israel did not ignore these difficulties. During its early years, it opened its gates to communities that had been evacuated *en masse* and communities that appeared to be under threat, but later, over the course of roughly a decade, it adopted a restrictive policy toward Jewish immigration from North Africa and Iran. This approach was intended to serve national interests – to implement an immigration policy in line with Israel's economic capabilities and to further the policy of settling Israel's peripheries and establishing new cities, later dubbed “development towns.” Even during the first half of the 1960s, when Israel had already brought over all the North African Jews who were interested in immigrating, it continued to place many of them in the network of peripheral towns established during the previous decade. Concurrently, it became evident that the Jews in Iran, for whom this was a period of prosperity, were for the most part uninterested in immigrating to Israel – neither in the 1960s nor later, after the Islamic Revolution.⁷⁴

In conclusion, Jewish emigration evidently suited the interests of various actors in the region: Arab leaders were rid of a minority whose presence was seen as problematic and domestically destabilizing, and simultaneously enjoyed the fruits of its abandoned and confiscated property.⁷⁵ The British supported Jewish emigration because they sought stability in the countries under their control and because during this period, in the aftermath of the Jewish Holocaust in Europe, they did not want to

be responsible for mass attacks against Jews in these countries. Although they were aware of the severe hardship for Jews and the steep price of displacement and adaptation to a new and impoverished country, the fate of immigrants to Israel was of less concern to them. This policy was also convenient for the United States, which sought, during these Cold War years, to prevent the spread of Soviet influence in the Middle East and therefore supported Britain in its spheres of influence. The Americans expressed their support indirectly through funding for the process. Israel was interested in receiving these immigrants because of demographic reasons, albeit not at the time or on the scale that this mass immigration actually took place. Meanwhile the Jews of Arab countries – the ones who paid the heavy price of displacement – immigrated to countries that were open to them at the time of their emigration and where they believed they and their children would have a better future. The reality they encountered in Israel was, of course, different and more complicated than what they had expected: they arrived as destitute refugees in an impoverished country, where they began a new life while having to endure many economic, social, and cultural difficulties.

These findings necessitate a new, less ideological, and more historical and critical look at the phenomenon of mass Jewish emigration from Arab countries. The findings point to the complexity of these migration processes and to the fact that despite similarities and despite their having a common basis, each case is different and unique. In this context the immigration from French North Africa and independent states also deserves examination. Research in this field is still in its early stages, and it requires more in-depth and wide-ranging exploration in order to develop a comprehensive conceptualization of the phenomenon of Jewish emigration from Arab countries.

Notes

1. To mention only the most prominent among them: Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*.
2. Trigano, *La Fin du Judaïsme*.
3. Naveh, *Avar be-se'ara*, 28–35; and Tadmor-Shimony, *Shi'ur moledet*, 53–5. Criticism of the Zionist narrative see: Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*.
4. Ibid. On the terms defining the immigration from Islamic countries see: Moreno, “Hisul, ‘aqira, hagira.”
5. Only in recent years have Muslim researchers begun exploring these issues. See Boum, *Memories of Absence*.
6. Shiblak, *The Lure of Zion*, 119–27; and Segev, 1949, 115–22.
7. Bat Ye’or, *The Dhimmi*; Peters, *From Time Immemorial*.
8. On the narrative of expulsion and ethnic cleansing, see Trigano, *La Fin du Judaïsme*; Zamir, *Tor ha-zahav*; Basri, *The Jews of Iraq*; Roumani, *The Case of the Jews from Arab Countries*; Gilbert, *In Ishmael's House. Julius, Uprooted*. See also the following websites: Harif, <https://www.facebook.com/Harif-174674685956239/>. Accessed July 9, 2024; Israeli American Council, “Point of No Return: Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries,” <https://www.israeliamerican.org/national-headquarters/media/point-of-no-return-jewish-refugees-arab-countries>. Accessed July 9, 2024. For a critical study of the phenomenon see the debate between Mark Cohen and Norman Stillman: Cohen, “The Neo-Lachrymose Conception;” Stillman, “Myth;” Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*, 136–83.
9. Beker, “The Forgotten Narrative.”

10. Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel"; Beinín, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*; and Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*.
11. See, for example, Sternfeld and Anzi, "Memory War."
12. For an overview of the historiography of the immigration from Islamic countries see: Meir-Glitzenstein, "Turning Points."
13. We do not have accurate data on the number of Jews who chose not to emigrate. About 7,000 remained in Iraq and in Libya and about 2,000 remained in Yemen.
14. Sicron, "Ha-alayah Ha-hamonit."
15. Zionist movements existed in all Islamic countries except for Yemen. On Zionism in various Islamic countries, see Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*; Kimche, *Tzionut be-tzel ha-piramidot*; Harel, *Damesek nikhbesha zmanit*; Meir-Glitzenstein, *Zionism in an Arab Country*; Gal, *World Regional Zionism*.
16. On the Jews of Turkey and their reasons for emigrating, see Bali, *The Silent Minority in Turkey*.
17. Sicron, *Ha-alayah leYisrael 1948–1953*, 35.
18. Of particular note was the discussion surrounding an article by journalist Aryeh Gelblum in *Haaretz*, April 22, 1949, and the ensuing discussion. See Tsur, "Carnival Fears."
19. Picard, *Aliyah be-mesura*, 87–110.
20. It is important to note that this article does not focus on the emigration of Jew from French North Africa which occurred mainly from the mid-fifties onwards and was conducted simultaneously with the French decolonization process. Many innovative new studies have been written about it, freed from the constraints of the Zionist narrative. They illuminate new perspectives of the Jewish migration from North Africa, focusing on the influence of social and transnational networks. For some of the most relevant studies see: Katz, *The Burdens*; Gottreich and Schroeter, (eds.), *Jewish Culture*; Miccoli, *Histories of the Jews of Egypt*; Trevisan Semi, "Lifewriting;" Cohen and Messika, "Sharing and Unsharing Memories;" Moreno, "Expanding the dimensions;" Moreno, "Beyond the Nation-state;" Moreno et al., *Ha-historia ha-aruka*; Dario, *Histories of the Jews of Egypt*; Miccoli, *A Sephardi Sea*.
21. Beinín, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, 93–4.
22. On the persecution of Iraqi Jews and their escape through the mountains of Kurdistan, see Kazzaz, *Sofa shel gola*, 181–8.
23. Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 187–222.
24. On the Jews of Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution, see Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*.
25. On the immigration of the remaining Jews of Yemen, see Ahroni, *Jewish Emigration from the Yemen*.
26. Ben-Gurion, "Netzah Yisrael," 34.
27. On the Jews of Yemen and their relations with Muslims over the years, see Tobi, *Yahadut Teiman*; Eraqi Klorman, *Traditional Society*.
28. On the status and identity of Iraq's Jews in the 1920s and 1930s, see Kazzaz, *Ha-yehudim be-Iraq*, 40–52; Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 17–57.
29. On the status of Libya's Jews, see Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 6–7, 38–41.
30. On the economic and social status of Iraq's Jews, see Kazzaz, *Ha-yehudim be-Iraq*, 74–124.
31. On the economic status of Yemen's Jews, see Parfitt, *The Road to Redemption*, 110–23.
32. On the persecution of Libya's Jews during the 1940s, see Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 28–37, 48–56; Simon, *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa*, 150–63.
33. On the characteristics and identity of this elite, see Snir, *Who Needs Arab-Jewish Identity?*
34. Meir-Glitzenstein, *The "Magic Carpet" Exodus*, 107, 121; Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq*, 88. Alaska Airlines and El Al founded a subsidiary company, Near East Overseas, which executed the airlift from Yemen and later changed its name to the Near East Transport Company.
35. On the rioting in Aden, see Ahroni, *The Jews of the British Crown Colony of Aden*.
36. On the persecution of Yemen's Jews, see Tobi, *The Jews of Yemen*, 163–4.

37. On the pogrom against Libya's Jews in 1948, see Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 56–61.
38. On the situation of Iraq's Jews during 1948–1949, see Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq*, 32–58; Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 185–190.
39. On the Farhud, see Moreh and Yehuda, *Al-Farhud*.
40. Kedourie, "The Break."
41. Yapp, *The Near East*, 397–402. On British interests in the Middle East, see also: Monro, *Britain's Moment*, 151–77; Boyce, *Decolonisation and the British Empire*, 150–76; Bar-On, *of All Kingdoms*.
42. Louis, *The British Empire*, 737.
43. Yapp, *The Near East*, 196–201.
44. On the assistance provided by the British to Libyan Jews in transferring capital and property, see Haggiag-Liluf, *Toldot Yehudei Luv*, 175.
45. *Ibid.*, 155.
46. Laskier, *Yisrael ve-ha-aliyah mi-Tzfon-Africa*, 175.
47. Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 69–105.
48. Haggiag-Liluf, *Toldot Yehudei Luv*, 139–144.
49. On this economic and medical assistance, see Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 74–82. OZE (Obshchestvo Zdravookhraneniia Evreev, the Society for the Preservation of the Health of the Jewish Population), founded in Eastern Europe, provided medical care and hygiene education across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Its efforts in North Africa, beginning after World War II, were extensive and important but have yet to be researched. See Beizer, "OZE."
50. Haggiag-Liluf, *Toldot yehudei Luv*, 175–83.
51. Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 187–94.
52. On the Hashed camp and its destruction following the Jewish emigration in March 1949, see Parfitt, *The Road to Redemption*, 181–7. The lives of the Jewish refugees in the camp are the focus of Gamlieli, *Teiman ve-mahane geula*.
53. On the attitude of Imam Yahya and his son Ahmed toward the Jews, see: Eraqi Klorman, *Traditional Society*, 91–5, 97–9, 104–5. On Imam Ahmed consent to the departure of the Jews see: *Ibid.*, 113–5. Eraqi Klorman assumes that Ahmed's cool relations with members of the Arab League also contributed to his decision.
54. On the British plan, see Meir-Glitzenstein, *The "Magic Carpet" Exodus*, 85–9.
55. On their travels within Yemen, see Gavra, *Ha-aliyah ha-gedola*, 547–75.
56. On the JDC's inadequate planning, see Meir-Glitzenstein, *The "Magic Carpet" Exodus*, 109–90.
57. See the horrifying account in correspondence from Yosef Zadok, a delegate who arrived to provide assistance and bury the dead, and descriptions by Dr. Abraham Sternfeld, who helped transport survivors to the transit camp, Meir-Glitzenstein, *The "Magic Carpet" Exodus*, 158–62.
58. Meir-Glitzenstein, *Between Yemen and Israel*, 207–52.
59. On Nuri al-Said's proposal, see Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq*, 44–50.
60. From the summary documents of the British talks, cited in Shiblak, *The Lure of Zion*, 139.
61. *Ibid.*
62. Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq*, 48–9.
63. Meir-Glitzenstein, *Zionism in an Arab Country*, 235.
64. Kazzaz, *Ha-yehudim be-Iraq*, 294–7.
65. Meir-Glitzenstein, "Terrorism and Migration."
66. In Israel this phenomenon was termed "uncontrollable immigration."
67. See note 65 above.
68. On the British role in this process, see Gat, "Britain and the Jewish Community of Iraq."
69. This is a salient subject in memoirs by Iraqi Jews. See Meir-Glitzenstein, "Terrorism and Migration."

70. On the seizure of Jewish property, see Gat, *The Jewish Exodus*, 144–51. The Iraqi authorities' perspective remains unclear because Iraqi archival documents are not available and therefore we must rely primarily on British reports.
71. Shiblak, *The Lure of Zion*; Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel"; Hever and Shenhav, "Alimut Baghdad," 132, 134.
72. For an in-depth account, see Meir-Glitzenstein, "Terrorism and Migration."
73. See Brav, *Dmuto shel ha-mehager ha-yehudi mi-tzfon Tunisia*; Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion*; Laskier, *Yisrael ve-ha-alayah mi-Tzfon-Africa*.
74. See Sternfeld and Anzi, *Memory War*.
75. Levin, *Locked Doors*.

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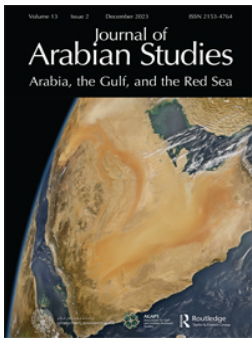
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Introduction: Reorienting the Gulf

CHARLOTTE LYSA, FATEMA HUBAIL and MARC OWEN JONES

Abstract: What constitutes the “Gulf” has been a subject of scholarly interest and critical disagreement. What shapes studies about and within the Gulf? Knowledge production concerning the Gulf has long endured a debate on whether the region (and the field) merits a categorization of exceptionalism. Following on from a previous article in this journal, which charted the evolution of Gulf studies, this special issue is intended as a point of departure from discourses premised on the dichotomy of exceptional/unexceptional and suggests a reorientation of “the Gulf” in Gulf studies. The articles of this volume situate the region within broader global contexts while still honoring its unique characteristics and internal diversity. Through the use of corpus analysis of a database of 10,003 journal articles published with a MENA country name in the title, we present a high-level analysis of the development of Gulf studies within the broader context of Middle East studies. This is intended as a preliminary step to understanding the development and motivations that drive studies about the Gulf, within (and outside of) the context of Middle East Studies. The complexity and diversity of Gulf histories, societies, and culture calls for new and dynamic approaches premised on reorientation. This special issue hence introduces diverse scholarly contributions across two lines of inquiry, epistemological and empirical — engaging, centering, and speaking from within and alongside the region, emphasising diversity, both in terms of discipline and the positionality of authors. The contributions in this issue demonstrate the rich potential of reorienting Gulf studies. They examine topics ranging from gender relations and migration to spatial politics and digital cultures — connecting local realities to transnational flows and global phenomena.

Keywords: Gulf Studies, GCC, methodology, epistemology, Middle East Studies, exceptionalism

1 Introduction

There is a growing need to reorient Gulf studies by centering the region itself and embracing new epistemologies and methodologies. Attempts to characterize Gulf studies often elicit charges of exceptionalism,¹ yet there remains a lack of consensus regarding the field’s theoretical and disciplinary foundations. The very invocation of exceptionalism presupposes established intellectual traditions, but their nature and vitality remain unclear. Moreover, the binary of

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¹ Gray, “Emerging Trends and Debates in Gulf Studies”, in Quenzer, Syed, and Yarbakhsh (eds), *Emerging Scholarship on the Middle East and Central Asia Moving from the Periphery* (2018), pp. 1–24; Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula* (2020).

exceptional versus unexceptional risks perpetuating dichotomous thinking, even when nuanced. As Gulf states increasingly assert their influence in international affairs, the emergence of what has been termed the “Gulf moment”,² prompts critical examination of the epistemological foundations and discursive construction of Gulf studies. This reflection is particularly timely given the broader global context of post-truth politics, rising populism, and concerns about declining academic freedom,³ all of which raise fundamental questions about the nature and value of knowledge production. This issue suggests a reorientation of “the Gulf” in Gulf studies, and the articles of this volume aim to move beyond both exceptionalism and reductionism, instead situating the Gulf within broader global contexts while still honoring its unique characteristics and internal diversity.

We must also consider the discursive and non-discursive processes that reify the Gulf as a distinct region, both within and outside academia. Who is included in, and excluded from, knowledge production about the Gulf? Is the perceived exceptionalism of the region a result of limited disciplinary engagement, insufficient scholarly attention, or intense focus driven by specific interests? How does Gulf studies position itself within the broader field of Middle East studies? The very concept of the “Gulf” as a region and “Gulf studies” as an academic field is the product of complex discursive processes spanning social, political, economic, and cultural domains. From archaeological investigations to analyses of imperial legacies, the construction of the Gulf as an object of study reflects diverse intellectual traditions and power dynamics.

The field’s emphasis on policy relevance may have led to an overrepresentation of think tanks and certain disciplinary approaches. Yet, how can we critically assess these trends without resorting to reductionist arguments? Is it possible to comprehensively survey Gulf studies without oversimplifying the literature or the region itself? Indeed, is there even agreement on what constitutes “the Gulf”? In this light, it is crucial to critically assess the current state and future directions of Gulf studies as a field or “area” of inquiry. What epistemological assumptions underpin research on the Gulf? How do changing regional and global dynamics shape the production of knowledge about the Gulf? And how might we reimagine Gulf studies to better capture the complexities of this pivotal region? This special issue explores innovative approaches to studying the Gulf, from critical examinations of knowledge production to empirical studies that shed new light on understudied topics. By bringing together scholars from diverse disciplines and backgrounds, we seek to challenge dominant narratives and expand the boundaries of Gulf studies. Our goal is not simply to critique existing frameworks, but to actively construct new ways of understanding this complex and dynamic region.

The contributions in this issue demonstrate the rich potential of reorienting Gulf studies. They examine issues ranging from gender relations and migration to spatial politics and digital cultures. Importantly, these pieces connect local realities to transnational flows and global phenomena. In doing so, they point towards a Gulf studies that is both more theoretically sophisticated and more empirically grounded in lived experiences within the region. Reorienting the Gulf is an ambitious and necessary project. It requires us to critically examine our assumptions, methodologies, and positionality as researchers. But it also opens up exciting new avenues for scholarship that can deepen our understanding of this pivotal region and its place in the world. As such, reorienting Gulf studies on an intellectual, epistemological, and methodological level is not a straightforward endeavor. Rather, it is a laborious and ongoing process.

² Abdulla, “The Arab Gulf Moment”, in Held and Ulrichsen (eds), *The Transformation of the Gulf* (2013), pp. 106–124; Gray, “Emerging Trends and Debates in Gulf Studies”, p. 106.

³ Education International, “Global Index Finds Most Countries Do Not Respect Academic Freedom and Shows Signs of Decline”, 14 April 2021.

2 Writing about the Gulf

In his 2018 review of Gulf studies, Matthew Gray identifies two distinct “Gulf moments.”⁴ The first “Gulf moment” occurred in the 1970s, following the independence of many small Gulf states and the oil boom. This period marked a growing interest among scholars and policymakers in “geopolitical stability, energy security, [and] terrorism.” These fields significantly shaped knowledge production on Gulf politics, expanding the field to contextualize and categorize the states’ complex historical contexts with current events.⁵ The second “Gulf moment” Gray identifies started in the early 2000s after a period where “wider Gulf studies perhaps appear[ed] less urgent”.⁶ This second moment is driven by a scholarly expression of the “environment of the Gulf” as a subregion requiring “detailed” fieldwork investigating liberalization policies, stagnation, shifts in power, and legitimacy.⁷ Though Gulf studies remain a rather small sub-field of Middle East studies, scholarly interest has not slowed down. This is to a large extent due to the increased and persistent relevance of the Gulf states in world politics through the 2010s and later, for example following the Arab spring and through increased globalization also in the cultural field — of which the 2022 World Cup in Qatar stands as a prime example. As such, it is pertinent to ask if the second Gulf moment is no longer a “moment” but rather has developed into a more permanent interest in the Gulf as a site of research driven by a growing number of established and emerging researchers (of which many are early career scholars within and from the region) within several fields, including history, archeology and political science in addition to dedicated area studies scholars.

It is not always clear-cut, however, what geographical area is referred to as “the Gulf” or included in “Gulf studies”. Historically and traditionally Gulf studies incorporate the states bordering the Persian/Arab Gulf: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. The Arabian Peninsula, and as such Arabian studies, largely overlaps with this interpretation of the Gulf—though includes Yemen and excludes Iran and Iraq. Increasingly, in particular among scholars working on these countries and in mainstream (western) discourse, “the Gulf states” is synonymous to the membership states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Sahar El Sayed, Reem Al-Hababi, and Md Mizanur Rahman argue that these states can be said to have a high level of “regionness” or at minimum a “regional community”.⁸ This, they contend, “can be particularly seen when analyzing the political, social, and economic dimensions in the region”.⁹ This “Gulf” is usually included as part of the Middle East, while at the same time being a region on its own distinct from this wider region. Moreover, the Gulf is contextualized in light of the greater Middle East, in its proximity to Iran, in terms of US military presence in the region. Within these constructions, scholars are confronted with the complex nature of area studies in general, and Gulf studies in particular. As Timothy Mitchell reminds us in the case of the Middle East more broadly, “The attempt to construct ‘the Middle East’ and other regions as distinct territorial objects defining a legitimate field of study crossed paths with the attempt to create ‘the economy’, ‘the political system’, ‘culture’, and ‘society’ as distinct social spaces, each taking the nation state as the normal location and extension, and each defining

⁴ Gray, “Emerging Trends and Debates in Gulf Studies”, p. 2–3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3–4.

⁸ El Sayed, Al-Hababi, and Rahman, “Gulf Studies: The Imperatives of Area Studies in the Gulf Region”, *Social Sciences* 12.5 (2023), p. 261.

⁹ *Ibid.*

the territory of a self-contained discipline.”¹⁰ In the case of Gulf studies, appealing to the nation-state as a unit of analysis invites scholars to consider the area in light of already established theoretical frameworks and groundings, wherein the “nation-state”, “politics”, “economics”, “security”, and other points of academic interest become “container entities”,¹¹ ones that establish the acceptable and permissible boundaries of knowledge production about the Gulf. It is in this sense that we encounter gatekeeping of Gulf studies, where marginalized, disruptive, and epistemologically privileged structures, narratives, and experiences comprise a niche in intellectual developments about the region. Arjun Appadurai astutely states that “Historians produce geographies”; in the case of Gulf studies, in many respects, political scientists operationalize the academic development of these geographies. Studies about “the Gulf” and emerging from within it experience gatekeeping, with an overwhelming focus on statecraft, rentierism, policy, and security.¹²

Definitions aside, the attention of scholars is not evenly distributed between the states of the region. James Onley and Gerd Nonneman, editors of the *Journal of Arabian Studies*, recently offered a review of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula studies from its inception in the 1940s–50s to the creation of a specific journal dedicated to the region — first *Arabian Studies* (1974–90), later *New Arabian Studies* (1993–2004), and culminating in the *Journal of Arabian Studies* (*JAS*) (2011–present).¹³ During the *Journal of Arabian Studies*’ first decade, it published 141 articles, out of which 60 were on the region as a whole.¹⁴ Of the remaining 81, sixteen were about Yemen, articles on the UAE and Saudi Arabia following right behind with 14 articles each. Kuwait and Qatar were examined in 12 articles each, Oman in six, Bahrain four and Iraq in one.¹⁵ The distribution of articles across the various states of the region in other journals are further discussed below.

Onley and Nonneman’s overview of articles published in *JAS* over these 10 years also addressed the distribution along different topics, showing how politics was the top subject with 22 articles, followed closely by economics and political economy (21) and history (18). Women and gender (13), anthropology and sociology (13), art, culture and history (12), and migration (10) followed with one article per year on average.¹⁶ Topics such as religion (4), military and security (4) and energy and climate (7) received less attention compared to how prominent these topics feature in mainstream discussions of the Gulf internationally.¹⁷ The first research-oriented journals on the Gulf, including *JAS*’s two predecessors, however, exclusively focused on humanities, excluding politics and the social sciences altogether. This only changed with the relaunch of *JAS* in its current form in 2011.¹⁸ The avoidance of political topics in earlier journals is interesting especially given the connection between Gulf studies and policy concerns prevalent today, discussed further below.

¹⁰ Mitchell, “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science”, in Szanton (ed.), *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (2004), pp. 74–118.

¹¹ Derichs, “Reflections: Normativities in Area Studies and Disciplines”, *Blog for Transnational Research*, 31 October 2014.

¹² Appadurai, “How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in a Global Perspective”, *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 1.1 (2010), pp. 4–13.

¹³ Onley and Nonneman, “The Journal of Arabian Studies and the Development of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies”, *Journal of Arabian Studies* 10.1 (2020), pp. 1–50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

3 Gulf exceptionalism and methodological nationalism

There is arguably a close link between Gulf studies and policy — and most often the political concerns of *non-Gulf* states. From various reviews of Gulf studies it is striking, though rarely called out explicitly, how intertwined studies of these states are with external, and to a growing extent internal, policy priorities.¹⁹ Gulf studies, as area studies more generally and Middle East studies specifically, has a historical connection to colonial and imperial endeavors.²⁰ But also more recent studies of the Gulf continue to be marked by a connection to external policy prioritizations, and topics such as oil and economy, terror and security. Think tanks occupy a significant position in knowledge production on the GCC-states (and, we suggest, at a level more disproportionate to academic research than what is the case in broader Middle Eastern studies). It is thus symptomatic that when rising interest in social sciences from within the Gulf, this is also explained by policy interest and needs.²¹ Rather than being dictated by either internal or external policy needs, however, research should be driven by a basic search for knowledge — at least to a greater degree than is the case today.

In recent years, scholars studying various aspects of Gulf states have critiqued Gulf studies for being marked by a certain “exceptionalism” — a form of orientalism particular to the Gulf visible in extravagant metaphors and an emphasis on the spectacular.²² The idea of exceptionalism can be summed up as a tendency that the starting point for many studies of the Gulf states departs from features of these states that stand out as exceptional. Ahmed Kanna, Saba Amélie Le Renard, and Neha Vora further explains Gulf exceptionalism as emerging through a multi-level process driven by both external and internal actors:

By Gulf exceptionalism, we are referring not only to representational practices but also to the ways that global political-economic and cultural connections, and histories of imperialism and capitalism, have been de-emphasized and often erased in knowledge production on the Arabian Peninsula, as well as financial, military, and diplomatic engagement. Therefore, exceptionalism calls forward a multilayered way of thinking about the effects of representation, which are embedded in state projects, migrant narratives, and heritage making — thus, there is no way to claim a hegemonic “Western” site of production of exceptionalism when it comes to the Gulf region, although we are interested in highlighting how this exceptionalism both obscures and advances US and European imperial interests in the region, certain forms of global capitalism, and white supremacy.²³

Similar critiques of scholarship on the Gulf among scholars of the Gulf are common, but often painted with broad and deflated assumptions — everything from journalism to research, and rarely substantiated with empirical data or concrete examples.²⁴ This is, at least to some extent, understandable as it is unpleasant to call out individual members of one’s community, but it also makes it challenging to have a detailed and informed conversation about what

¹⁹ Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula*; Onley and Nonneman, “The Journal of Arabian Studies and the Development of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies”; El Sayed, Al-Hababi, and Rahman, “Gulf Studies: The Imperatives of Area Studies in the Gulf Region”; Gray, “Emerging Trends and Debates in Gulf Studies”.

²⁰ Onley and Nonneman, “The Journal of Arabian Studies and the Development of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies”.

²¹ El Sayed, Al-Hababi, and Rahman, “Gulf Studies: The Imperatives of Area Studies in the Gulf Region”.

²² Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora, *Beyond Exception. New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula*; see also: Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (2020), p. 8

²³ Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula*, pp. 7–8.

²⁴ Gardner, “[Review of] *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula* by Ahmed Kanna et al.”, *The Middle East Journal* 75.2 (2021), pp. 348–351.

needs to be improved in the field, or what is missing in the study of Gulf states. Perhaps such critique is a better fit for journalistic or think tank reports than for peer reviewed research. Moreover, as Andrew Gardner points out, exceptional features such as the demographic situation in the Gulf states where non-citizens constitute a large minority or even a majority, are relevant factual starting points for scholarly inquiry,²⁵ but also provide useful knowledge in comparative studies.²⁶ This focus on exceptional features becomes a problem, however, if such features are examined and explained detached from broader trends or theories — or if they dominate the field of study at the expense of other topics.

While an external lens can be said to have formed much scholarly attention on the Gulf, this tendency exists in tandem with another, closely related one of approaching the Gulf States as only understandable based on their own unique features, local history, and circumstances. This is evident through the general lack of theory-building (with the very prominent exception of rentier state theory) and few comparative studies coming out of Gulf studies.²⁷ On the one hand then, studies of the Gulf are often based in the policy needs and interests of external states and outside forces that shapes the topics being studied, while on the other, these studies are often carried out in a way that takes an introspective approach to Gulf history, politics and society. As such, area studies arguably have a problem with methodological nationalism. This does not mean that descriptive studies of particularities in a given Gulf state is inherently bad, but that there is an overwhelming tendency to orient “the Gulf” as an object of scholarly inquiries in relation to external interests, and at the same time as detached from broader trends, theories, and tendencies. While these approaches provide significant insight for academics in the field of Gulf studies, they do however contain and orient the area to the points to which this special issue aims to depart from. To further illustrate this containment of knowledges, a holistic and rigorous mapping, documentation, and analysis of the breadth of knowledge production on the Gulf in the larger area of Middle East studies is necessary.

4 Status of the discursive production of the Gulf in Middle East studies

Of course, determining the state of a field is an enormous task, one that requires multiple, ideally triangulated, approaches. As a rudimentary starting point and in the spirit of not wishing to promote any straw men, or make too many assumptions about the disciplinary emphasis within Gulf studies, we conducted a large-scale computationally-assisted content analysis of all English-language Middle East studies journals. The purpose was to see the discursive production of the Gulf region within broader Middle East studies, and the salience of Gulf studies within Middle East studies. It was also another opportunity to further bring aspects of digital humanities research to the mainstream of Gulf studies. All journals within the humanities and social sciences that included “Middle East” within the title of the journal published between 1947 and 2021 were downloaded from EBSCO’s database (accessed via Qatar National Library) and analyzed for country-related case studies. All articles published in those journals with a MENA country name in the title were downloaded.²⁸ This resulted in approximately 10,003

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Norbakk, “[Review of] Ahmed Kanna, Amélie Le Renard, and Neha Vora, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula*, Cornell University Press, 2020”, *Babylon: Nordisk tidsskrift for Midtøstenstudier* 20.1 (2022), pp. 96–97.

²⁷ Gray, “Emerging Trends and Debates in Gulf Studies”, pp. 5–7.

²⁸ A broad definition of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as adopted here includes: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Mauritania, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Yemen.

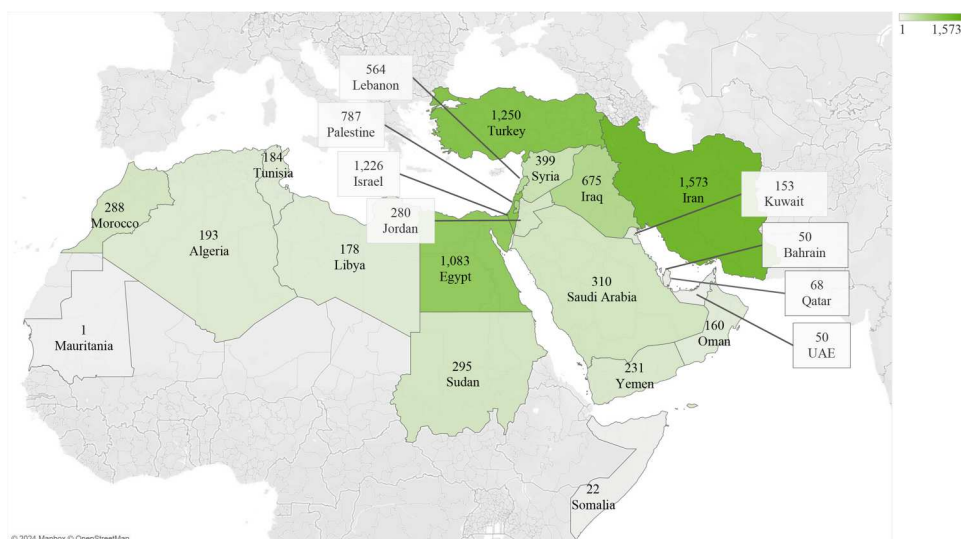


Figure 1: Distribution map of country coverage in Middle Eastern studies journals.

journal articles published over half a century. Although the majority were in English, the results included research in Arabic and Turkish. A GPT tool was used to classify the broad disciplinary angles based on the titles. Of course there are limitations with such methodologies, but they can provide a useful high-level insight into the development of Gulf studies, and possible explanations for motivations in doing so, especially within the context of Middle East studies.

In terms of raw mentions, Iran ($n = 1,573$) dominated followed by Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq ($n = 675$), Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia ($n = 310$), Sudan, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen ($n = 231$), Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Oman ($n = 160$), Kuwait ($n = 153$), Qatar ($n = 68$), Bahrain ($n = 53$), United Arab Emirates ($n = 50$), Somalia and Mauritania (see [Figure 1](#)). Of the countries of the Persian Gulf, the order of countries by most frequently mentioned is; Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and finally the United Arab Emirates. This shows that the discursive production of Middle East studies has traditionally focused on studies of Iran, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and, to an extent, Palestine. It is notable that North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula tend to be more peripheral in terms of mentions — perhaps with the exception of Saudi Arabia. Certainly, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE are among the lowest in terms of mentions.

Given that the Arabian Peninsula was more peripheral in terms of its prominence in Middle East-focused journals, journals were ranked according to their inclusion of the peninsula states in their coverage. Of the 26 journals covered, issues with at least 100 articles in the sample were analyzed, and only those that covered both countries within and outside the Arabian Peninsula were included (see [Table I](#)). Journals were ranked to see the extent to which the Arabian Peninsula was covered. The *Digest of Middle East Studies (DOMES)* featured the most case studies involving the peninsula while *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, along with *Middle East Quarterly* had the lowest percentage, at 3% and 5% respectively.

It is difficult to determine whether this makes a particular state, Gulf or otherwise, marginalized in terms of academic focus. Indeed, the unit of the nation state belies other factors such as geopolitics, population size, number of universities etc. If one

Table I: Relative weight of articles on the Arabian Peninsula in Middle East studies journals.

PUBLICATION TITLE	ARABIAN PENINSULA	NON-ARABIAN PENINSULA
<i>DOMES: Digest of Middle East Studies</i>	16.57%	83.43%
<i>Review of Middle East Studies</i>	14.93%	85.07%
<i>Middle East Studies Association Bulletin</i>	13.39%	86.61%
<i>Middle East Policy</i>	12.29%	87.71%
<i>Middle East Journal</i>	11.34%	88.66%
<i>British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies</i>	10.80%	89.20%
<i>MERIP: Middle East Report</i>	9.25%	90.75%
<i>Middle Eastern Studies</i>	8.79%	91.21%
<i>International Journal of Middle East Studies</i>	8.50%	91.50%
<i>Middle East Critique</i>	6.60%	93.40%
<i>Journal of Middle East Women's Studies</i>	6.09%	93.91%
<i>Middle East Quarterly</i>	4.66%	95.34%
<i>Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, & the Middle East</i>	3.45%	96.55%

took, for example, the number of articles produced about each country in relation to its population size, some Gulf states, such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar, would feature highly (although it is still a somewhat arbitrary metric). Yet Saudi Arabia, and the United Emirates in particular would still be fairly underrepresented in this capacity (see Table II). What is clear is that different journals with “Middle East” in the name have a relatively large variance in their focus on the Arabian Peninsula, pointing to a difference in the perceived relevance or focus of the Gulf region across English-language journals focusing on the Middle East.

A corpus analysis followed by an analysis of relative frequencies of keywords (keyness analysis) revealed that there are some interesting differences in the prominence of topics based on geopolitical regions (see Table III). The term “oil” for example is the third most common term in the analysis of article titles that include country names from the GCC states. Indeed, the relative frequency of the term oil compared to the corpus of titles of non-GCC focused articles was much higher. This demonstrates that there is a heavy focus on oil. Similarly, the relative frequency of terms like “security” appear higher in the GCC corpus than the non-GCC corpus. The same is not true of terms like colonialism and imperialism, whose relative frequencies are much higher in the non-GCC corpus. Historically, there is no real reason to spend less time thematically focusing on notions of imperialism or colonialism in the Gulf. Indeed, this seems to confirm the findings by Kanna et al.,²⁹ who noted that there were fewer studies focusing on imperial and colonial legacies in the Gulf. The relative frequency of the term “terror” is also higher in the GCC corpus. Again, this tends to underscore arguments that studies of the Gulf have differed from non-GCC countries in their focus on topics such as security, terror and oil. Policy is one of the most common words, and perhaps would be more common had the analysis included documents produced by think tanks. When grouped by other regional units, the term “policy” is prevalent in studies of the Levant, broadly defined, and the Mashriq region. Terms like “revolution” and “war” also diminished in salience in the GCC corpus as opposed to the non-GCC corpus. Interestingly, the GCC is the only regional entity in which “state” is more common a term than “politics”.

²⁹ Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula*.

Table II: Number of article titles mentioning a country's name, as a proportion of the country's population, in Middle East studies journals.

COUNTRY	COUNT OF MIDDLE EAST STUDIES JOURNALS COMPILED	POPULATION	ARTICLES PER 100,000 OF POPULATION
Palestine	787	5,052,776	15.6
Israel	1226	9,558,000	12.8
Lebanon	564	6,825,445	8.3
Kuwait	153	4,270,563	3.6
Bahrain	53	1,701,583	3.1
Oman	160	5,161,262	3.1
Jordan	280	10,203,140	2.7
Libya	178	6,871,287	2.6
Qatar	68	2,881,053	2.4
Syria	399	17,500,657	2.3
Iran	1573	84,380,000	1.9
Iraq	675	40,412,297	1.7
Tunisia	184	11,818,618	1.6
Turkey	1250	86,988,758	1.4
Egypt	1083	109,262,200	1
Saudi Arabia	310	35,901,159	0.9
Morocco	288	36,910,560	0.8
Yemen	231	29,825,968	0.8
Sudan	295	44,776,644	0.7
UAE	50	9,890,402	0.5
Algeria	193	43,851,043	0.4
Somalia	22	15,893,222	0.1
Mauritania	1	4,814,000	0

Table III: Most frequent terms mentioned in titles of articles on specific geopolitical regions.

CORPUS	TOP-10 WORDS
Maghreb	politic*, state, Egypt, development, French, revolution, history, economic, colonial, change
Levant (narrow)	politic*, war, Arab, state, Middle East, history, peace, conflict, Jewish, Palestinian
Levant (broad)	politic*, modern, state, Islam, economic, policy, social, English, new, development
Mashriq	politic*, war, state, Arab, history, modern, development, economic, policy, conflict
GCC	state, politic*, development, oil, history, women, society, economic, Islamic, modern, policy
Non-GCC	politic*, war, state, modern, history, Arab, policy, Islamic, development, revolution
Persian Gulf	politic*, war, state, history, revolution, modern, development, Arab, women, policy

Note: the asterisk * as the final character in “politic*” was used as a “wildcard” to represent any of the final letters of the terms “politics”, “political”, etc), in order to treat this cluster of related terms as one.

As Michael Gray has noted, the oil embargo and the independence of Gulf states prompted a new wave of scholarship of the region in the 1970s.³⁰ This observation plays out in the computationally-assisted analysis. From 1940 to 1960, the number of articles on the GCC states as a proportion of all articles about the Middle East was 6–7%. In the 1970s this number jumped to 14%, and has remained between 12 and 16% every decade since. Perhaps unsurprisingly,

³⁰ Gray, “Emerging Trends and Debates in Gulf Studies”.

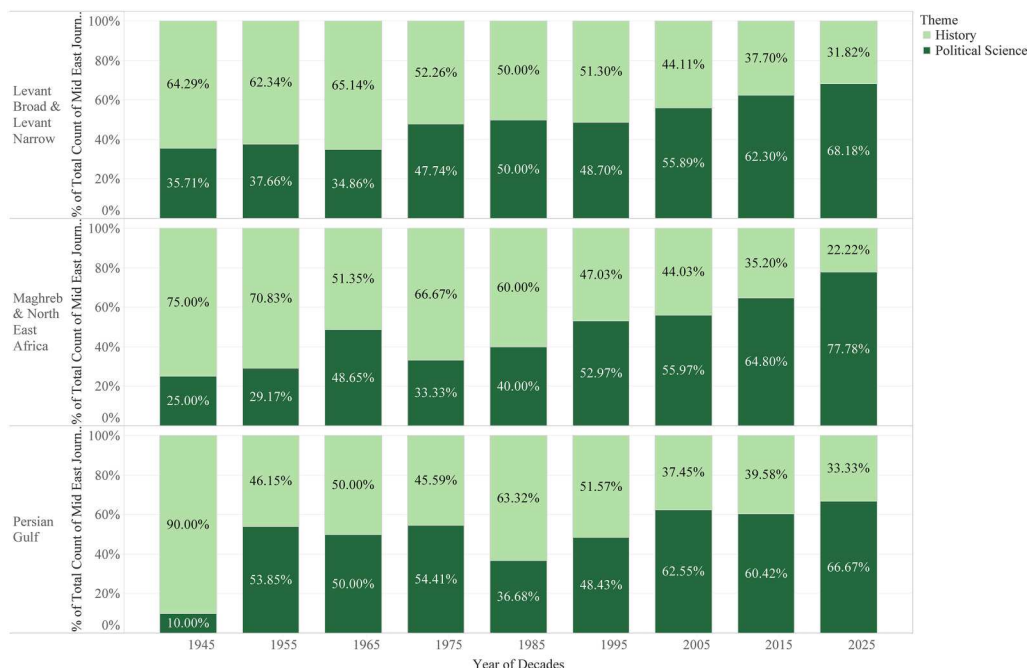


Figure 2: Total number of studies in history and political science by grouped region over five-year increments between 1947 and 2021.

the coverage of countries is often defined by geopolitical events. This is most notable with Iraq, which saw a dramatic increase in articles following the 2003 invasion.

The GPT assisted disciplinary analysis (see [Figure 2](#)) revealed few major differences between countries generally seen as part of the Gulf region and the wider Middle East. The most common disciplinary areas included political science (35%), history (29%), economics (7%), sociology (6%), and gender studies (4%). Some areas, such as gender studies and economics, formed a slightly larger component within studies of the Arabian Peninsula — which may come as a surprise. For gender studies, this was only a one percent point difference (5% as opposed to 4%), while for economics it was 2% (9% for Arabian Peninsula countries as opposed to 7% for non-Arabian peninsula countries). A notable trend across all regions studied is that studies of political science are slowly displacing the emphasis on historical studies.

By analyzing each country in the Middle East region by disciplinary focus we can see differences across prevalence (see [Figure 3](#)). Although history and political science are the most common disciplines across all countries, there are examples where the relative proportions are strikingly different. On Oman, for example, studies of history appear far more frequently than political science, while for Qatar, the reverse is true, where studies related to political science outpace historical studies.

A further analysis of collocates of country names situated within the Arabian Peninsula reveals the top 10 most-frequent words associated with each country (see [Table IV](#)). While there is much overlap, oil is only in the top 10 for Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. Similarly, it is in the top 10 most-commonly associated words with the term “Gulf”. Curiously, while “war” and “crisis” feature as commonly co-occurring terms with Yemen, it does not appear in the top 10 collocates with any of the other Arabian Peninsula countries — although

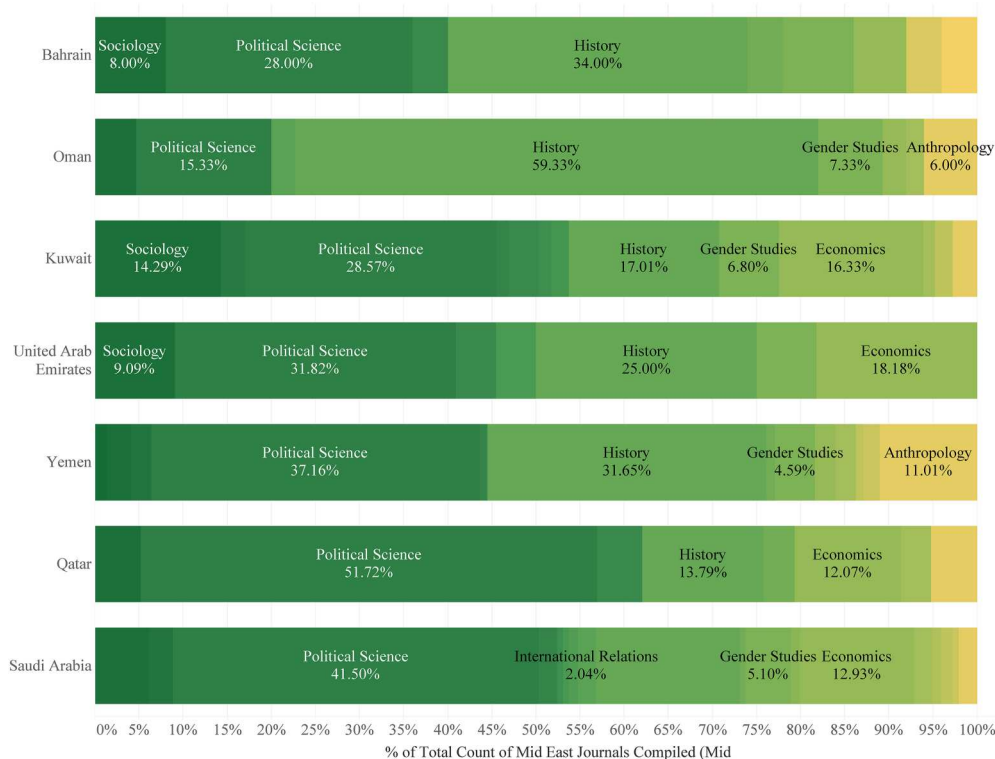


Figure 3: Disciplinary distribution of articles per country.

“war” and “crisis” are associated with the term “Gulf” itself. Not discounting the relevance or importance of studies of energy and natural resources within the Arabian Peninsula as a whole, the volume of studies on Saudi, coupled with a focus on oil in Saudi Arabia, is perhaps in part responsible for giving the impression that a lot of studies on the Gulf tend to emphasize oil. Perhaps it is the study of Saudi Arabia itself that is shaping people’s perceptions of Arabian Peninsula studies writ large.

While offering some interesting insights this rather high-level analysis has numerous limitations. Limitations here included relying on EBSCO’s database. Of course, knowledge production cannot be limited to databases, but they serve as a useful proxy for the analysis of mainstream academic knowledge production in and on the region. Indeed, it is telling in and of itself that such databases maintain a relative paucity of knowledge in other languages. It should be noted that due to the search heuristic of including country case studies some analysis will have been missed.

This analysis has purposefully excluded analysis of articles in *JAS* and other Gulf studies-specific journals precisely because they are dedicated to covering countries within the Gulf, and because these journals explicitly acknowledge the importance and relevance of the region within broader Middle East studies. The purpose was to identify the position of the Gulf and countries of the region within the context of journals who self-described themselves as covering the “Middle East” region.

Table IV: Top ten most frequent words associated with studies of each country in the Arabian Peninsula.

CORPUS	TOP-10 WORDS
Kuwait	politic*, development, Gulf, oil, women, economic, state, society, history, Islamic
Yemen	politic*, war, republic, development, history, civil, crisis, society, women, world
Saudi Arabia	state, politic*, oil, kingdom, development, women, Gulf reform, states, religion
UAE	women, study, law, economic, survival, state, society, history, economy, unity
Bahrain	development, states, social, politic*, Gulf, economic, women, oil, modern, land
Qatar	politic*, modern, Gulf, state, women, security, challenges, world, small, political
Oman	development, state, Gulf, women, politic*, society, twentieth, tradition, history, century
Gulf	states, crisis, war, society, development, politic*, women, rulers, policy, oil

Note: the asterisk * as the final character in “politic*” was used as a “wildcard” to represent any of the final letters of the terms “politics”, “political”, etc), in order to treat this cluster of related terms as one.

5 Contributions

This special issue of *JAS* seeks to further knowledge production on the Gulf by studying the region in relation to global currents based on perspectives from the Gulf — centering the Gulf, not the external, and starting from an interest in how the Gulf relates to the international rather than how it stands out from it. Against this backdrop, we suggest a reorientation of the Gulf in Gulf studies. A reorientation implies centering the region to any scholarly inquiries, an attempt not to just move beyond Orientalist tropes but other thought systems that frame the study of the region. This does not equate to an understanding of the Gulf region as exceptional or unexceptional per se, but rather as a geographical area that deserves scholarly attention and to be subject to studies based on a search for knowledge and understanding — independent of external policy concerns, ideological demands or as relative to foreign systems. This issue seeks to explore epistemological underpinnings of the study of the Gulf. It is interested in how perceptions of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula affect how the region is being studied across various fields in social science and the humanities and how readjusting the research agenda can bring about new and important knowledge. It also seeks to examine the link between power, politics, and knowledge production of and within the region. The issue is an attempt to critically explore, survey and encourage dialogue with scholars from multiple spheres and from multiple disciplinary and geographic positions about the visibility, existence, reification and potential absence of the Gulf across respective disciplines and/or sub-disciplines within the humanities and social sciences.

This collection of articles aims at shifting the existing and dominant paradigm in the study of the Gulf by engaging, centering, and speaking from within and alongside the region. These topics are either rigidly contained within the academic production on the Gulf, or they simply do not garner scholarly attention. The articles presented here function as a stepping stone in the task of reorientation — with two main lines of inquiry. The first includes scholars engaging on the epistemological front, where they explore knowledge production(s) around different themes and countries within Gulf studies. Contributions within this level of inquiry confront pre-existing knowledge produced about the Gulf, by examining the structures, identities, and experiences that have not received significant scholarly attention. The second positions scholarship on an empirical level, as others delve into both established and new topics, from lesser explored or often excluded angles.

Beginning with an epistemological exploration of existing studies across Middle East journals. Bruno Schimidt-Feuerheerd, in “Inspecting the Engine Room: Source Selection and Methodological Considerations of ‘Saudi Studies’”, investigates source selection and methodological

considerations that have shaped Saudi studies. By meticulously analyzing 152 articles from leading Middle Eastern studies journals, this article reveals disparities in source utilization across various subfields. Schmidt-Feuerheerd highlights how research on Islamism and gender studies often incorporates extensive fieldwork and Arabic sources, while studies on foreign policy and economics tend to rely more on English-language secondary sources. This critical examination of research practices challenges existing epistemological assumptions and calls for a more nuanced engagement with linguistically diverse local sources across all subfields. While the focus is centered on Saudi studies, Schmidt-Feuerheerd's contribution exemplifies the tools and considerations that reorientation necessitates — such as incorporating a more methodologically rigorous and culturally informed approach to understanding Saudi society and politics.

Shifting discourses with the aim of promoting new knowledge productions requires unpacking, critiquing, and often *correcting* dominant and saturated narratives. In “Are there Really No Refugees in the GCC States? Establishing a Basis for Further Research”, Charlotte Lysa, one of the guest editors of this issue, challenges the canard that the GCC states are devoid of refugees. The author provides a nuanced examination of the region's complex landscape, arguing for increased scholarly attention to de facto refugees in the Gulf states, highlighting the invisibilization of refugee populations due to legal-normative categorizations. Through historical and contemporary case studies, Lysa demonstrates the need for a reorientation in research approaches, emphasizing refugee-centric methodologies. This work offers valuable insights into the intersection of migration, diplomacy, and refugee policies in the Gulf, advancing the field beyond traditional perspectives and calling for more comprehensive research on this understudied topic.

The task of reorientation also invites scholars to challenge the historical framings and constructions. Hessa Al-Nuaimi's “Towards a Race and Coloniality Research Agenda: Exploring the Exclusionary Racialisation of Arabs in Gulf States”, utilizes the theoretical frameworks of postcolonialism, decolonialism, and critical race theory to understand the construction of identities in the Gulf today. While the question of race in the Gulf is often used in conjunction with migration, the author explores the dynamic racialization methods that produce and sustain social categories of migrant and citizen as rooted in the British Empire presence and mandate in the Gulf.

By examining the UAE's implementation of core human rights treaties, Kristin Kamøy, in “Human Rights Treaties in the Gulf: An Overview of Emirati Adaptations of Universal Rights to Local Circumstances”, provides valuable insights into how universal rights are interpreted and adapted in the Gulf context. The author analyzes the UAE's reservations to treaties, highlighting the influence of Islamic law, citizenship concepts, and cultural values on the country's approach to human rights. This nuanced exploration of the UAE's legal framework and its engagement with international human rights norms offers a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between global standards and local contexts in the Gulf region, advancing the field beyond traditional Western-centric perspectives.

Noof Al Thani, in “Socio-Political Expressions on Twitter: A Case Study on Female Qatari Users”, explores Qatari women's socio-political expressions on Twitter (now X), offering an important insight into political expression in Qatar. By focusing on the experiences of young Qatari women, it provides nuanced insights into the complexities of digital citizenship and political expression on social media. The research employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining media studies, gender studies, and political science to analyze how local cultural norms intersect with global social media trends. Through empirically grounded qualitative research and engagement with theories of surveillance and public opinion, the article offers a critical examination of the modalities of political expression online, reflecting on the complex dynamics involved in expression that move beyond a censorship/freedom of speech dichotomy. Additionally, it raises questions about gender and epistemic violence in the realm of those studying the Gulf using social media data.

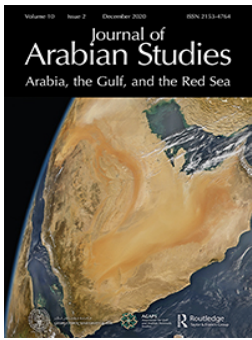
The topic of migration has gained significant scholarly traction in Gulf studies. However, the notion of migration does not emerge as a singular, unitary reality and experience across Gulf States. Sana Quadri's "Traders to Tycoons: Indian Migrant Businesses and their Evolution in the Political Economy of the UAE" studies Indian migrant businesses in the UAE. The article challenges conventional labor migration narratives that focus predominantly on low wage workers, offering a nuanced examination of Indian entrepreneurship's evolution from pre-oil era traders to contemporary tycoons. By analyzing historical continuities and transformations in their socio-economic role, Quadri contextualizes the UAE's development within global economic flows and power structures. The interdisciplinary approach, synthesizing historical analysis, political economy, and migration studies, provides empirically grounded insights into the complex interplay between diasporic businesses, local power dynamics, and transnational networks. This article thus advances a more sophisticated understanding of the Gulf's political economy, illuminating the pivotal yet often understudied role of migrant entrepreneurs in shaping regional development and state-business relations. This is especially true with regards to the role of the entrepreneurial class in promoting regime stability.

This special issue concludes with acritical exploration of how spatial and social margins are constructed and maintained. In "Development vs. Gentrification: Competing Narratives of Msheireb Doha", Aiza Khan and Aashish Karn study the gentrification of the Msheireb quarter in Doha, shedding light on the intersection of modernization and the lived experience of migrants amidst the "smart city" zeitgeist. Through ethnographic methods and critical analysis of state narratives, the authors explore the competing discourses surrounding urban development in Qatar. The article reveals how the experiences and contributions of low-income migrant workers are often erased from official histories, while state-sponsored accounts emphasize modernization and cultural preservation. By examining the complex interplay between urbanization, migration, and identity, the study offers a nuanced perspective on Gulf cities' transformation. The authors' focus on lived experiences and marginalized voices aligns with the special issue's goal of challenging dominant narratives and providing a more inclusive understanding of Gulf societies.

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Introduction

DAVID B. ROBERTS

At some stage, it would be nice to stop being so surprised by events on the Arabian Peninsula. The recent history of the region includes multiple instances of long-held taboos being overturned, hitherto unseen policies being enacted, and regional norms being shattered across the sociopolitical and foreign policy spectrum. Mohammed bin Salman's de facto rule in Saudi Arabia continues to upturn expectations as to what a Saudi leader can do in the domestic sphere, slashing through a litany of hitherto firmly entrenched shibboleths. The war in Yemen, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), is straightforwardly unparalleled in Emirati modern history, fundamentally recasting expectations as to the role of force as a lever of state power. Otherwise, in the foreign policy realm, in 2020, the UAE and then Bahrain recognized Israel for the first time — the first Arab states to do so since Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. In leading this gambit, the UAE firmly broke one of the enduring taboos of Arab politics, which held that Arab publics would not stand for any normalization without significant Israeli concessions. The 2017 blockade of Qatar launched and led principally by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain joins this panoply of norm-challenging policies.

Yet there is nothing necessarily new about the Gulf's changeability. Indeed, the British announcing their decision to leave the Gulf in 1968, Iraq invading Iran in 1980, and Iraq invading Kuwait in 1990 were all surprising and region-shaking events. Whether the region's volatility is a feature and not a bug, the fact remains that we need to deal with the region as we find it, contemporary unpredictability and all. So, as political scientists and area studies-focused scholars, we need to investigate phenomena such as the Gulf blockade of Qatar as region-defining issues. The blockade affected all levels of analysis, from the high politics of international relations to the low politics of the domestic level, with direct impacts on individuals studying, living, working, holidaying, and visiting family in the different monarchies.

The goals of such studies must be reasonable. One need not be an arch-postmodernist to believe that there is no single truth that explains why the blockade was launched, and consequently what might resolve it. Rather, the goal must be to uncover wider pathologies of behavior that exacerbate animosities and engender commonalities of approach that allowed for a blockade of this nature to be implemented. Moreover, given the severity of the blockade, it is important to reflect on its dramatic impact in varied spheres, even in light of the 2021 resolution.

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1 The story so far

At 05:50 on 5 June 2017, the Bahraini ministry of foreign affairs announced it was cutting diplomatic ties with Qatar. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt soon followed suit. At 14:00 Qatar's one and only land border was blocked by Saudi Arabia and then "by the end of that frenetic day, Qatar was under land, air, and sea blockade, its only land border shut, its airplanes barred from much regional air-space, and its shipping unable to call at many neighboring ports".¹

Unsurprisingly, the blockade engendered a spurt of academic coverage. Of all the Gulf states, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE garner the majority of coverage in the popular press and by researchers, so this deeply unusual event was certain to be conspicuously well covered. Relations among the protagonists was assumed to be improving after a serious spat in 2014. Indeed, only weeks before the break in relations, the region's leaders met President Trump in Saudi Arabia without any obvious concerns.²

Initial reports focused on the nuts and bolts of the situation and the immediate implications. The original narrative for the blockade was that, after Qatar's national news agency published a series of provocative stories about a speech purportedly given by Emir Tamim, the quartet of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the UAE were compelled to respond. It transpired quite quickly, however, that this was, in the parlance of the age, fake news, and that these reports were in fact fabricated by a hack on the Qatari news agency as a *casus belli*.³ Such an innovative evolution on the utilization of modern communication tools to further narrative competition prompted its own furrow of ongoing academic research.⁴

Aside from these reflections on this contemporary twist on the age-old concept of *casus belli*, the blockade prompted a range of pragmatic concerns. Companies pondered the implications of (now seemingly stranded) assets, blockages to major importing and exporting routes, and, overall, the hitherto inconceivable impossibility of conducting business across belligerent states. Short, factual explainers by shipping companies, insurers, and consultancies provided essential clarity at the start of the blockade as to the pragmatic implications.⁵ Extending outwards, trade concerns transmogrified into various (often Qatar-based) scholars using the norms, rules, and regulations of various international fora, such as the World Trade Organization, as a lens through which to examine the blockade, and demonstrate the perfidy of the opposition.⁶ The swift pace with which the antagonism proliferated to myriad such fora highlighted the multi-faceted nature of the conflict, with each state leveraging its soft power, its links, and its cash reserves to prosecute its case.

The see-sawing regional stock markets garnered attention, while a significant proportion of coverage focused on food security concerns given the high proportion of food Qatar imported.⁷

¹ Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience* (2020), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³ Jones, "Hacking, Bots and Information Wars in the Qatar Spat", *The Qatar Crisis, POMEPS Brief* 31 (2017), pp. 8–9.

⁴ Cherkaoui, "A New Kind of Information Warfare? Cyber-Conflict and the Gulf Crisis 2010–2017", *The Political Economy of Communication* 6.1 (2018), pp. 3–35; Krieg, *Subversion: The Weaponization of Narratives* (Forthcoming); Krieg, "The Weaponization of Narratives Amid the Gulf Crisis", *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Krieg (2019), pp. 91–108.

⁵ For a roundup of such informative articles and explainers see: Steamship Mutual website, "Qatar – A Number of Countries Cut Diplomatic Relations", 22 June 2017.

⁶ Al-Naemi et al., "The Blockade Imposed Against Qatar: An Analytical Study of WTO Principles", *International Review of Law* (2019); Khalaileh, "The Blockade of Qatar: Where Coercive Diplomacy Fails, Principles of Law Should Prevail", *International Review of Law* (2019).

⁷ Buigut and Kapar, "Effect of Qatar Diplomatic and Economic Isolation on GCC Stock Markets: An Event Study Approach", *Finance Research Letters* (2019); Selmi and Bouoiyour, "Arab Geopolitics in

With the onset of the blockade, Qatar pivoted with surprising fluidity towards Iran and particularly Turkey as critical new suppliers replacing the loss of the one and only land border (shared with Saudi Arabia) and hitherto vital reexporting routes from Dubai.⁸ Such a turn of events prompted scholars to examine issues related to the resilience of Qatar, both in the sense of switching sources of imports, and in the wider sense of state-societal resilience.⁹ The failure of any mediating initiatives to resolve the conflict prompted a range of articles, while scholars focused on the ramifications in terms of international relations.¹⁰ Given that Qatar did not capitulate, as some expected it would inevitably have to do under such localized and concerted pressure, some academics interpret this as Qatar having “won” the blockade.¹¹

Several books have emerged focusing on the crisis, but two stand out. The most acute observer of Qatari politics, Kristian Coates Ulrichsen published *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study in Resilience* in 2019. A tour de force of the imbroglio, it examines its origins and the local Qatari reaction, expertly unpicking how the state managed to resist such profound pressure to persevere and then prosper.¹² Andreas Krieg edited a useful collection of articles whose key benefit stems from its varied approach, with authors offering thought-provoking reflections upon the crisis.¹³

2 Adding to the literature

In 2019, the Center for International and Regional Studies (CIRS) at Georgetown University in Qatar launched “The GCC Crisis: Qatar and its Neighbors” research initiative. The result is this Special Issue, a set of thoroughly reviewed articles that strive to advance the literature on the Gulf monarchies on an area of evident and contemporary concern. This introduction outlines the objectives of the initiative and summarizes the collected studies. Two articles focus on Qatar and, rather than make the usual assumptions about the effects of the blockade internally to the state, the authors use primary data to prove and explain what effects we can and cannot observe. Moreover, each article retains the ability to situate Qatar-focused conclusions in a wider purview to draw lessons and extrapolations applicable to other Gulf monarchies. Two

Turmoil: Implications of Qatar-Gulf Crisis for Business”, *International Economics* 161 (2020), pp. 100–19; Hussein and Lambert, “A Rentier State under Blockade: Qatar’s Water-Energy-Food Predicament from Energy Abundance and Food Insecurity to a Silent Water Crisis”, *Water* 12.4 (2020); Ahmed et al., “A Blessing Inside a Calamity: Baladna Food Industries in Qatar”, *International Journal of Management and Enterprise Development* 19.3 (2020), pp. 203–16; Koch, “Food as a Weapon? The Geopolitics of Food and the Qatar–Gulf Rift”, *Security Dialogue* (2020).

⁸ Başkan and Pala, “Making Sense of Turkey’s Reaction to the Qatar Crisis”, *The International Spectator* 55.2 (2020), pp. 65–78; Rende, “The Qatar Diplomatic Crisis and the Politics of Energy”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 6.2 (2017), pp. 59–64; Boussois, “Iran and Qatar: A Forced Rapprochement”, *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Krieg (2019), pp. 217–32; Zaccara, “Iran and the Intra-GCC Crisis: Risks and Opportunities”, *IAI Papers* 19 (2019).

⁹ Gengler and Al-Khelaifi, “Crisis, State Legitimacy, and Political Participation in a Non-Democracy: How Qatar Withstood the 2017 Blockade”, *The Middle East Journal* 73.3 (2019), pp. 397–416; Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*.

¹⁰ Milton-Edwards, “The Blockade on Qatar: Conflict Management Failings”, *The International Spectator* 55.2 (2020), pp. 34–48; Fraihat, “Superpower and Small-State Mediation in the Qatar Gulf Crisis”, *The International Spectator* 55.2 (2020), pp. 79–91; Al-Horr, Tok, and Gagoshidze, “Rethinking Soft Power in the Post-Blockade Times: The Case of Qatar”, *Digest of Middle East Studies* 28.2 (2019), pp. 329–50.

¹¹ Collins, “Anti-Qatar Embargo Grinds toward Strategic Failure”, Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy *Issue Brief* 1 (2018); Zafirov, “The Qatar Crisis—Why the Blockade Failed”, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 11.2 (2017), 191–201.

¹² Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*.

¹³ Krieg (ed.), *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis* (2019).

further articles examine the ramifications of the blockade on the Gulf's foreign relations. One reflects on the meaning of the blockade as a transformative break in the hitherto tested but broad Gulf consensus, perhaps even presaging the emerging of a new Gulf system, such is the difficulty of grasping how the status quo ante could be meaningfully restored, even in light of the 2021 resolution. The other article will likely come to be seen as a core analysis of the evolution of European-Gulf relations, expertly tracking their ebb and flow. The opening article offers a theoretically-rooted reflection on core identitarian issues in the Qatari-UAE relationship, positing ultimately how foreign policies have become so mingled with ideological orientations, that animosity against the Other has come to be folded into each state's self-conception.

The aim of this Special Issue is to bring together a group of articles illuminating hitherto less focused upon aspects of the crisis. This is to advance a rounder grasp of, first, the conditions that allowed for the blockade to instigate and relatedly, second, the impact of the blockade on important issues within the monarchies. Otherwise, it is worth noting that much of the scholarship outlined above emerged comparatively swiftly after the blockade's instigation. The work that emerged from 2019 and onwards — notably Coates Ulrichsen's work and articles in a Special Issue of *The International Spectator* — benefit quite significantly from the extra distance from the crisis. This collection similarly prospers from a healthier distance, the stabilization of the crisis, more time to reflect upon the resulting impacts, and the ability to build upon existing approaches.

In the opening article, I investigate what utility can be derived from deploying one of the newer intellectual furrows emerging in international relations theory, that of ontological security, in the context of the Gulf blockade. The insight of ontological security is that it frames how ideational concerns related to how actors come to understand themselves can have a direct and decisive impact upon international relations. In the Gulf context, it suggests that Qatar and the UAE have a propensity to suffer from a structurally rooted animosity. Partly, this logic mirrors Freud's *Narcissism of Small Differences*, whereby, of the six monarchies, Qatar and the UAE have fewer unique characteristics and thus find themselves in the Gulf's uncanny valley. Exacerbating these issues are the emergent identity tropes around which each state strives to construct, establish, and reify its sense of who and what it is, and what it is for (i.e. its ontological security). In this sense, fate and leaders' choices decided that Qatar would take a quasi-traditional foreign policy approach seeking to engage with and support groups on the Islamist spectrum. But the UAE would see such relationships as perfidious and harmful. Thus, mere policy choices reflecting each state's preferences became not only hardened into state narrative and quasi-identity, but ever more sharpened and antagonistic to the Other's approach. Primarily as a result of the blockade, policy differences that translated into opposing world views have been further transmogrified into a zero-sum bilateral crisis that is itself becoming constitutive of each side's identity and ontological security. Both sides derive value and a clearer sense of who they are from the blockade, which speaks to the depth of the problem facing those seeking a meaningful long-term resolution.

Two articles examine the impact of the blockade within Qatar. Mitchell and Al-Hammadi examine the impact of the crisis on concepts of Qatari national identity and nationalism. The sentiment that the crisis has "forged" Qataris together or otherwise provided a fillip to nationalism has become an axiomatic truth associated with the crisis. However, as yet, this is not a sentiment that has been properly researched and analyzed. Bringing original fieldwork to bear, the authors focus on how the newly built National Museum of Qatar evidences the "malleability of national identity during times of political upheaval". As such, this article offers empirically grounded analysis that directly advances our understanding of the impact of the blockade on an important area of focus in Qatar. Moreover, this article is further able to take a rare snapshot in time of acute upheaval to examine how a critical instantiation of national identity — a national museum — is flexing and reacting to an ongoing political crisis. One result they find in the Qatar context, but

which has ramifications further afield, is that the forging of a conspicuously unified concept of national identity in Qatar elides hitherto complexities felt among and between Qatari citizens.

Justin Gengler also uses the Gulf crisis as a “rare laboratory” experiment to analyze the impact of the blockade. As one of the Gulf’s foremost scholars on matters related to public opinion, Gengler has a trove of primary data going back a decade, which gives him an unrivalled position from which to analyze how the blockade did or did not affect pre-existing trends. Gengler compares survey data preceding the blockade with new data obtained in 2018 and 2019. His findings chime with some hitherto only speculative qualitative analysis, arguing that there is some evidence of greater inter-group trust between Qataris and non-Qataris, as well as a boost in interest in political participation and state responsiveness. Importantly, however, Gengler notes that such changes — though with the fillip because of the blockade — are reflective of trends much longer in evidence. The blockade was not, therefore, some transformative event in interpersonal relations on the Qatari Peninsula. Gengler also points to a hitherto unappreciated significant boost in the average income in Qatari households because of the blockade and the state’s “reinvigoration of the rentier state”.

The regional and international impact of the crisis is discussed by Coates Ulrichsen and by Nonneman. Within the Gulf itself, Coates Ulrichsen consummately paints a picture of specifically how the blockade has damaged regional structures and alliances. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), formed of the six Gulf monarchies in 1981, has long been infamous for its disagreements and differences, despite a panoply of commonalities among the member states. Coates Ulrichsen makes the point, building on existing work, how at its core the blockade emerges from divergent threat perceptions among the monarchies. More to the point, Coates Ulrichsen’s contribution is that he outlines how this occurred, noting that the crisis struck several particularly vulnerable points within the monarchies and their relationships. The divergence was, he argues, rooted in the emergence of an ever spikier “zero-sum” mentality among the monarchies, such that compromise became ever more elusive and any meaningful coherence among the monarchies all the more difficult. Even though the blockade has now been resolved, it is difficult to see how the status quo ante of the GCC’s “pragmatic flexibility” can be restored. Indeed, for its many flaws, the US-GCC alignment and axis dominated (if not determined) the Gulf’s order. But, in an era of escalating regional security concerns — from rising attacks on oil infrastructure to a deterioration of the US position in the region — the GCC’s paralysis and dim prognosis are potential harbingers of a shift from one concept of regional order to another.

Arguably the leading scholar in this subfield, Nonneman focuses on the Gulf–European relationship. His article offers a tour de force of the evolution of these dynamics, chopping up contemporary history into twelve periods or shifts since the Second World War. Rooted in this critical overview, Nonneman analyzes both sides of the relationship, commenting on the broad continuities of objectives sought by European states in the region, as well as the important shifts among the Gulf nations in their response. Notably, Nonneman reflects on the impact of deep divergences in approach among Gulf nations and an increasing assertiveness in pursuing their prerogatives. For both European states and Gulf monarchies, the US role remains decisively important in shaping the contours of their policies. In light of the US’s growing erraticness and the Gulf’s burgeoning confidence, European actors lack the ability to offer a steadying or particularly influencing hand.

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